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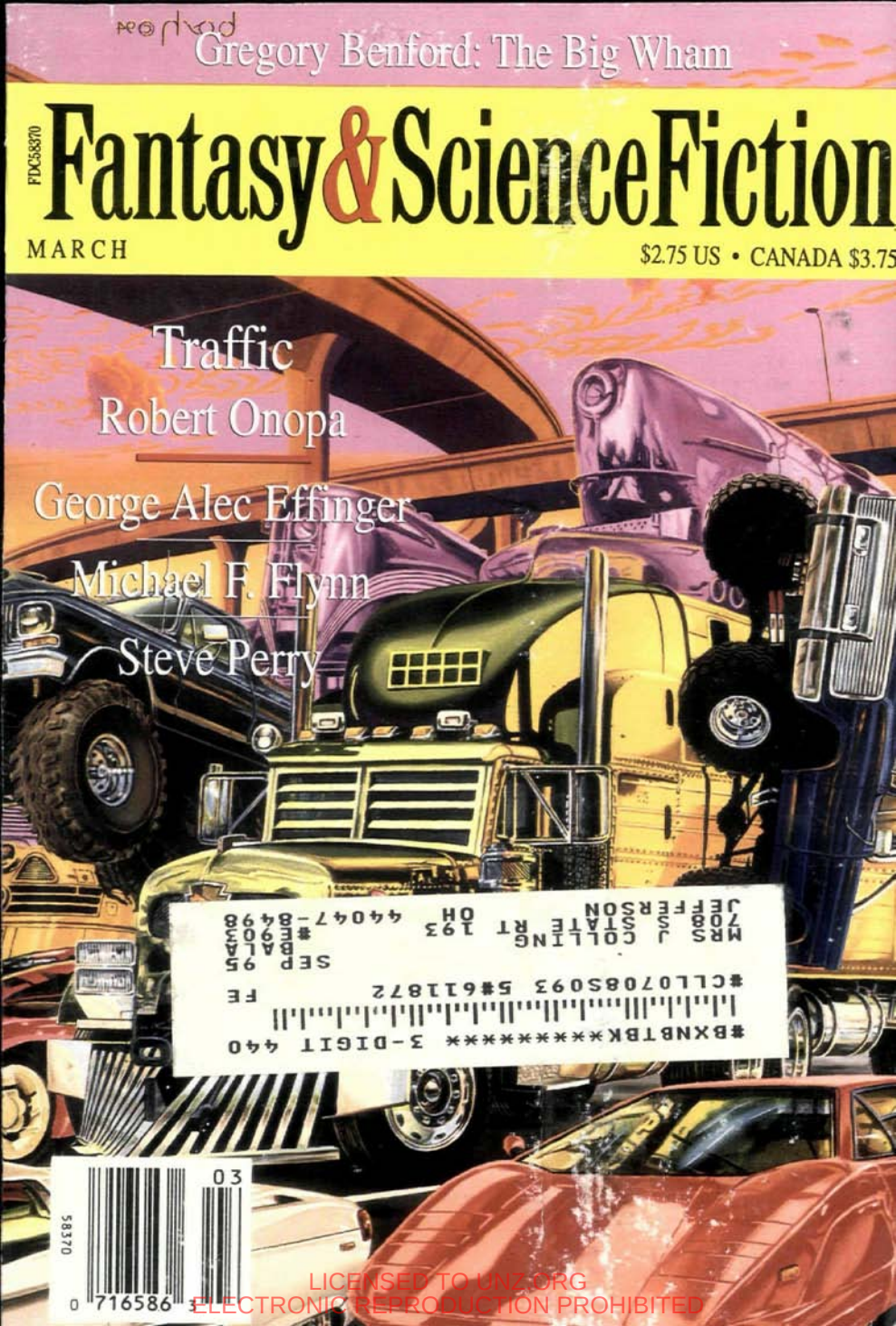

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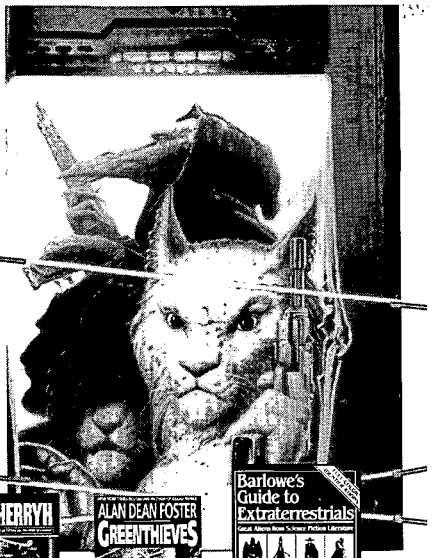

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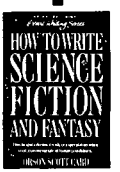

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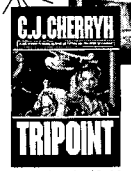

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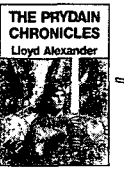

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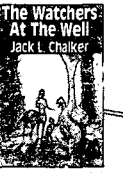

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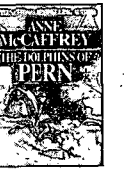

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CARTOONS: SCOTT MASEAR (29); S. HARRIS (44); DANNY SHANAHAN (85).
COVER BY KENT BASH FOR "TRAFFIC"

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 88, No. 3, Whole No. 526, March 1995. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.75 per copy. Annual subscription $26.00; $31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1995 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN LAST month's editorial, we discussed the result of our latest reader survey. We used the survey for two things: to discover demographic information about our readership, and to ask a few needed questions about editorial content. (Namely, the publisher and I wanted to know if the readers liked the changes of the past few years.) Last month, we explored the demographics (and used so many statistics that I actually had to dust off some very grimy math skills). This month, we'll look at the responses on editorial content.

We didn't ask about specific stories. Instead, we kept the survey general. We wanted to know, over all, how to categorize what people read (or didn't read). Part of the problem with a survey of this type is definitions: how does Reader A define science fiction? Is A's definition different from B's? We ignored nuances like that, and hoped that we were all thinking along the same lines when we discussed the categories of fiction.

Most readers want more science fiction. Sixty-one percent of respondents wanted to see more sf in our pages, while 36 percent were happy with the sf content. Forty-five percent of the readers are happy with the fantasy content, and 36 percent (the same 36 percent?) want more fantasy. The big shift in this category from our last survey is in the area of horror. Fifty-five percent of the readers want less horror in the magazine's pages.

None of this is a surprise to me. I think, in some ways, this is the way the genre's breeze is blowing. I find myself tiring of horror these days as well, although I see a bit more fantasy than I would like. I constantly send out a cry for more sf—and thankfully, am beginning to see a response from the writers.

We did attempt to break down stories by type, although this too was difficult. Readers prefer "Sci Fi" (whatever that may be) to everything else. They like "Future tech" marginally better than "Space," "Myths and Folklore" marginally less than "Fantasy," "Human drama" more than "Horror." Since these categories went undefined (and were not determined by me), they make little sense to me. Is "The Night We Buried Road Dog," the Jack Cady

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SHIPS OF MERIOR

Janny Wurts

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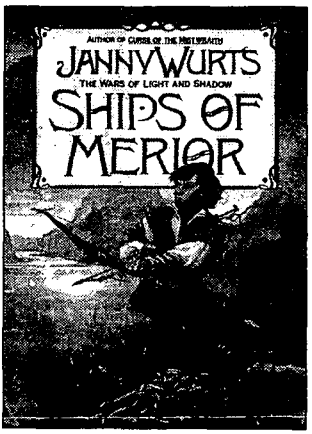

Janny Wurts is an immense creative talent. She illustrates nearly all of her books and is a world fantasy award-winning artist. And then, of course, there's her writing talent! In *SHIPS OF MERIOR*, the second volume in her developing masterpiece, *The Wars of Light and Shadow*, she continues to explore the outer realms of fantasy and the inner realms of humanity. Once again, Janny Wurts has outdone herself.

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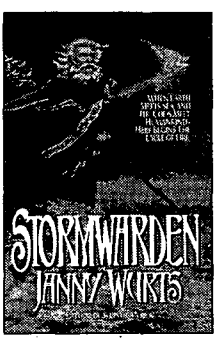

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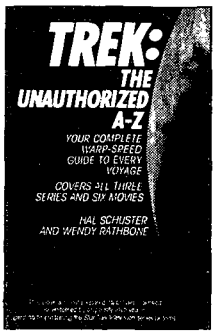
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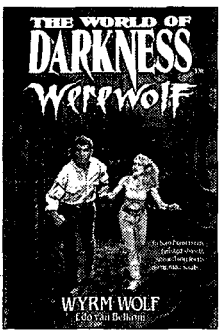

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Edo van Belkom

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novella which won a spate of awards last year and received all sorts of acclaim from critics and readers, Fantasy, Horror, Myth and Folklore, or Human Drama? I could apply all four categories to it. It's easier to define what it is not. I am hoping, in future surveys, to narrow this question down a bit more, perhaps with examples.

As far as story length is concerned, most readers (56 percent) prefer the short story to anything else. Novellas come second (30 percent), with novelets a distant third (14 percent). The fact that readers like short stories is no surprise, but I am pleased that folks prefer the longer stories to the middling length. Novellas are a particular favorite of mine and, even though they are hard to write well, an excellent novella is a gem without price.

We are a fiction magazine, and our reader response reflects that. However, we also have other features in the magazine. Here's how those rank: The covers and cartoons are our most popular "non-fiction" features. My editorial comes in next (whew!) followed closely by the science columns. The book columns split, depending on the columnist, between being slightly more or slightly less popular than the film columns. The competitions, to the sadness of our publisher, are the least popular feature of the magazine — although 58% of the folks who responded did find the competitions to be good or excellent.

The surprise here is that the book columns attract less of a readership than we thought. The relief is that, even after we lost Isaac Asimov, the science column has remained popular. A large minority, fifteen percent of the readers, do not read the non-fiction at all. That fifteen percent didn't even comment on the covers or the cartoons.

Finally, readers seem pleased with the magazine as it is. They don't want a letters column, articles about sf or illustrations. Nor do they want the magazine to change its frequency. Thirty-two percent are happy with the eleven issues per year, with another thirty-one percent who don't care how many issues they get a year.

Overall, the survey was very satisfying. Most of our readers remain long-term subscribers, and enjoy what they read. They spend over an hour a month with the magazine, and when they are done, they place the magazine on the shelf instead of in a recycling pile. Rest assured that we will seek out more science fiction, and control ourselves when it comes to horror.

We probably won't do another survey for a few years. We have enough information from this survey to satisfy advertisers and to give us something to think about. You might see a few of these numbers again in future editorials, as we process the information. Thanks to everyone who filled out the survey. We appreciate the feedback.

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Michael F. Flynn calls "The Promise of God" his "first unambiguous fantasy." The story came out of an idea-brainstorming session that former F&SF book columnist Orson Scott Card ran at a science fiction convention a few years ago.

Michael usually plays in the realm of science fiction, as evidenced by his many appearances in Analog, *and by his short story collection,* The Forest of Time and Other Stories *(Tor). His next novel,* Firestar, *is about the way people reinvent themselves, which could be a fantasy theme, except that Michael chose to explore the story in a high-tech near future setting.*

The setting in "The Promise of God" is low tech, but the attention to detail and the workings of the magic system show Michael's sf background.

The Promise of God

By Michael F. Flynn

You shall have joy, or you shall have power, said God; you shall not have both.

IT BEGAN TO GROW COLD in the cabin after the sun went down, and Nealy thought about building a fire. It would be a fine fire, roaring and crackling and toasting warm. It would light the room with a delicious dancing light, and he and Greta could beek on the outer hearth. He loved the way that firelight played off Greta's features, making them red and soft and shiny; and he loved the way the smoky smells of the burning wood blended with the earthy smells of Greta herself. Yes, a fire was surely what was needed.

The wood was stacked against the back wall. He had chopped it himself, as Greta had asked. Use the axe, she had told him before leaving to trek down the mountainside to the village. Don't do it the Other Way.

Nealy snuggled deeper into the chair and looked over his shoulder at the cabin's door. He couldn't see what difference it made. He flexed his hands,

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sore and stiff from the chopping, and rubbed the hard palms together. Hard work. Blister-raising work. It was easier the Other Way. Your muscles didn't ache; your back was not sore. The faggots could march themselves into the hearth and leap upon each other; then he could summon a salamander to ignite them. It would be easy, and it would be fun to watch.

Nealy gazed on the wood. His fingers plucked aimlessly at the arm of the chair. It was growing chilly in the room. He thought about building a fire.

When Nealy was seven, a wolf broke into the sheep pen. He heard the bleating all the way from the chicken coop and he ran as fast as he could down to the meadow gate, slipping in the mud where the run-off from the old well-pump trickled toward the creek. As Nealy raised himself from the muck, he spied the wolf among the flock as though through parted clouds. Sheep were milling and baa-ing, knowing there was a danger amongst them, but at a loss for what to do. The wolf raised its head from the carcass of a young ewe and bared bloody teeth. Far off, in the autumn field on the far side of the pen, Papa had dropped the reins of the plow horse and was hopping across the furrows with his musket in hand. Too late, though; too late for Fat Emma.

Nealy staggered to his feet and the wolf backed away, not ready to attack a human being, but neither ready to retreat, either. When it turned, Nealy could see the badly healed scar along its flank, the stiffness with which one hind leg moved; explanation, at least, for why it had chosen the sheep pens. Nealy pointed a finger at the beast.

"You killed Fat Emma, you!" he shrieked, as only young boys can shriek over a favorite animal lost; and never mind that Emma would betimes have graced his own table. At seven, the future is a hazy thing. He made a gesture with his hands. Anger and instinct moved his arms; and he felt something — he felt some thing *— course through him like water through a pipe, as if the pulse in his veins gushed forth in a great spray.*

And the wolf howled and twisted, leaped upon itself and lay still.

Nealy's breaths came in short gusts. His brow and face were hot and flushed and his chest heaved. His head ached and he felt very, very tired. The sheep milled about in the pen, bleating and bleating and bleating and bleating. Stupid *beasts, Nealy thought. Lackwits.* Sheep deserved what happened to them. *He made another gesture and the fleece upon Gray Harry*

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began to blacken and smolder. Harry shook himself. Smoke rolled off him, then flames. Harry ran, still unsure where the danger lay, knowing only to run and escape.

With a cry, Nealy dropped to his knees in the mud and covered his face with his hands. His head throbbed. What had he done? What had he done? He felt his father's arms gather him in, banding him tight against his sweet-smelling linen shirt. Between sobs, Nealy told him what had happened; and his father kept saying, "I know, Nealy. I saw."

After a while, his father stood him upright and brushed him off and straightened his clothes. "There," he said with a catch in his voice. "You look more presentable now. The wolfskin is yours, you know. It will make a fine cloak. You can wear it to school and the other kids will be jealous."

"Buh — Buh — But, Gray Harry — " Nealy's words bobbed in his throat.

His father looked past him, at the dead animals in the pen. He could feel Papa's head shaking as he buried his face in his father's chest. "You shan't have that fleece, Nealy," he heard him say. "No, you shan't have that one."

The rapping at the door was repeated three times. Nealy twisted in his seat and stared at it, wondering who it was. Not Greta, for she would not have knocked. A neighbor? Someone from the village? The knocking boomed: a fist against the thick, wooden slats. Finally, a kick and a muffled voice. "I know you be within, Master Cornelius. I saw your wifman leave."

Nealy nodded to himself. Someone craving admittance. Perhaps he should open the door and admit whoever it was. He pondered that for a time, weighed the urim and the thummin in his mind, chased the decision as it slipped like quicksilver through the fingers of his mind, while the pounding on his door increased. Perhaps he should...

But the decision was taken from him. The door creaked open and a mousy-brown face peered around its edge. It brightened when it saw him, and showed a smile white with small teeth. "There you be, Master Cornelius. I knew you were here."

"God's afternoon to you, Goodwif Agnes," Nealy said, for he recognized the man now. "I pray you are well."

Agnes touched the mezuzah lightly to appease the household lares and closed the door behind her. She curtsied quickly and awkwardly, then stood there, dressed in a shapeless, butternut homespun gown that just brushed the

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tops of her moccasins. The top button in the front of her gown was unfastened, so that Nealy could see a soft bit of roundness on either side of the opening, like twin crescent moons.

"God's afternoon, Master Cornelius." A hint of color suffused her cheeks, so perhaps she knew that her gown was unfastened; or that Nealy had noticed.

Has she come to seduce me? Nealy wondered. There were wivmen enough who wanted his seed. That would explain why she wore no coverslut over her gown. He knew Other Ways of pleasuring, Other Ways of bringing a wif to ecstasy, riding atop a rolling sea of pure joy. Sometimes Greta allowed him to use those Ways on her. She would arch her back in rapture while he spelled, and give soft, little cries — though afterward she would often grow dread-full and beg him never to do it again, even if she asked. Though she always did, she always did. And Nealy had no choice but to obey.

"I'll not mump with you," Agnes said. "I crave a boon."

Of course, she did. They all did. Why else would she have come. "And what boon is that?" Politeness came easy. Politeness cost nothing.

"My house-bound, sir Master. He has the fleas some'at bad; and I was wondering, I was, if you could use your dweomercræft to relieve him." She stood, twisting the front of her gown in her fist, flushed in the face and looking down.

"And you as well?" he asked with a half-smile. That which has touched an unclean thing became itself unclean. See Leviticus. Yet, did she know how awe-full it was what she asked of him? "You know the custom," he chided her. "You must approach my rixler. Greta has gone but lately and..."

"I know." Agnes paused and took a deep breath. "I waited until she left. I addressed her yestere'en, but she laughed at me and said that my wereman and I should wash ourselves and our clothing with lye soap and a stiff wire brush."

Nealy laughed. "Aye, by Hermes, that would work!" He felt the hammer in his veins, the sudden, momentary distancing of his vision, and knew that the scrubbing *would* work, better than Greta had supposed; but before he could tell Agnes of his incontinent spelling, she spoke.

"But you could make it so the fleas would never return, so that Lucius and I 'ud be clean for good and aye."

Nealy paused with his mouth half-open and pondered the additional

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requirement. Now, that did put a different cast on things. There were any number of alternatives. He closed his eyes to better envision them. Yes, four or five possibilities, some of them quite amusing. And it made Alice's request so much more interesting.

To ply the craeft, as all men knew, would nibble the soul away.

His parents had begun the search for a rixler that very evening. The priest had come up from Lechaucaster, down by the forks of the river, where the chain dam hoarded the headwaters for the southern canal. He had come up the mountainside a-muleback and had tested Nealy with an ankh. It was stuffy in the close-bed with the priest. The man stank with the sweat of his riding and his breath was foul. Nealy remembered everything about that day with the clarity of a landmark spied across miles of fog and mist.

Mama had cried. He remembered that, too.

"For a while yet, he may refrain," the priest said with a shaking head. "Ynglings oft try to abstain; yet in the end, they cannot restrain themselves and are drawn back to the Other Way in spite of everything."

His mother rose from the table and turned crossing her arms across herself—and Nealy drew back quickly into the confines of the close-bed lest she see him. But he leaned his head by the door so as to hear everything.

"But Nealy is a good *boy," she said. "And dweormen do much good in the world."*

"Esther..." Papa's voice, warning.

"But only under the tutelage of a trained rixler," insisted the priest. "One who may provide a soul for him when his craeft has eaten his own." Then he chanted from the Gospel of Thomas:

> "'When you make the two into one,
> When you make the inner like the outer,
> And the outer like the inner,
> And the upper like the lower,
> When you make the male and the female into a single one...'"

Nealy had heard the words before, at synagogue, when the priest sang from the Hermetic books, but they had meant nothing and still meant nothing.

"He is too young," said Mama through a quiet sob. (Oh, and Nealy bristled at that. Too young! Why, he was seven! All of seven...)

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"It comes on them at the age of reason," the priest said. "Best that his training begin tonight."

"So soon?" Papa's voice had been laced with sorrow. "I had thought that..." Papa's voice trailed off.

The priest was silent a moment. Then he spoke firmly. "Nothing is gained by putting it bye. There is only loss. I shall have a mister come to tutor you, and to select the rixler. Does the lad prefer girls or boys?"

"Let it wait for a moon or so. He is my son. I..."

"Delay too long," the priest warned, "and he may not bond with his rixler at all." The priest's voice had gone soft and low. "Or have you forgotten what was born within the Barrens?"

He heard Mama suck in her breath. Nealy did not understand. Only that the Pine Barrens was a place Mama used to frighten him into good behavior. No one went there. No one who ever came back. In two hundred years, no one had ever come back.

"Tonight," the priest continued firmly. "Tonight you must open the need that only his rixler may fill."

"My son," said Papa in a choked voice. "How can I?"

"How can you not?" the priest insisted.

That evening, Mama did not come to kiss him and tuck him into bed as was her wont. Nealy waited and waited and she did not come. He was afraid that something had happened to her and he began to cry and still she did not come.

Later, when his sobs had stilled themselves by exhaustion, he heard from his parents' bed the sounds of others sobbing.

"STOP!" GRETA'S voice jerked Nealy around with his mouth open and his hand half raised. She had used the *vox*, what the Guyandot Skraelings called *orenda*. Nealy paused with the words unspoken on his tongue. He could no more proceed than a winterlocked stream.

Greta's eyes took in Agnes and Nealy. Took them in, saw them, understood them. Judged them. She stared at Nealy a moment longer with eyes the color of a storm-proud sky. Then, with barely a glance at Agnes, she turned and unfastened her cloak of charred sheeps'-wool and hung it on the peg behind the door. Greta was a buxom man, her breasts full and round under

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her laced buckskin coverslut. Her golden-grey hair was braided in tight whorls behind each ear.

"Mistress Rixler," said Agnes, "I only — "

"Hush, child." The voice was not loud, but it compelled. Greta bent and unfastened her leggings, which she tossed in the corner by the door; and exchanged her boots for moccasins. Her pendant, a brightly jeweled vestal's dagger in a leather scabbard, dangled from her neck when she bent over.

"Nealy, dear," she said, "be a host and offer our guest some wine." Nealy hopped to do as he was bid, grateful to be acting, grateful for having been decided.

"No, I could not." Agnes edged her way toward the door.

"Stay, child. We have matters to discuss." Nealy listened to the wivmen while he arranged the goblets and removed the wine from the coldbox. Sometimes he felt as if he were both at a play and in it; as if he were watching and waiting and was occasionally called upon to speak lines written by someone else, words as surprising to him as to anyone.

Agnes stood stiffly and wrung the homespun gown in her fist. "I was not... I did not come to swyve your wereman."

Greta laughed. "So. Then, button up. Don't wave a musket you don't mean to fire. Nealy, dear, would you have taken her if she had offered?"

And that was most definitely a cue. Nealy handed Greta her goblet, half-full of chased kosher Oneida. He looked at Greta, looked into her eyes, before handing Agnes the guest's goblet. He imagined what Agnes looked like, imagined her pink and rosy nakedness — younger, firmer than Greta, smooth and soft and warm, smelling of sweat and rut. Imagined her wrapping herself around him. Quite the bellibone. "Yes," he decided as he took a sip from his own goblet.

"If you ever made up your mind." Greta also sipped. Over the cup rim, she glanced at Agnes, glanced at Nealy. "He will eventually, you know. Make up his mind. If I am away too long. If he has no more chores set for him. He has some will left in him."

"Idle hands are the devil's tools," agreed Nealy. He wondered if Greta would tell him to fick Agnes. He hoped so; he felt himself growing werile at the thought. *Tell me I can. Tell me I can.* Greta smiled at him, no doubt noticing, then turned a stern eye on Agnes. "You came about the fleas, didn't you? Don't deny it. And after I told you. You keep yourself clean, you keep

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your dogs in the yard. You don't need any Other Way."

"It's easier the Other Way," Agnes said petulantly. Nealy thought the young man had a point, but Greta looked at Nealy; and Nealy saw infinite sadness behind the eyes. "No," said Greta. "No, it is not." She studied the wine in her goblet and was quiet for a long while. Nealy wondered if she was trying to foresee and was on the part of offering to do it for her when she spoke. "You know that going the Other Way eats the soul, yngling."

"Everyone knows that, mistress."

"But do you know what that means? Do you feel it *here*?" Greta slapped herself on the bosom. "By Hermes, Jesus and St. Mahound!" she swore. "What can you possibly know?"

Agnes shrank away and the goblet fell from her fingers, splashing an ablution across the outer hearth. "No, mistress. Plainly, I do not. I —"

"Oh, child." Greta's voice was heavy. "Nealy, were you about to spell her fleas away?"

Nealy started, caught unawares by the sudden question. He nodded. "And her were's in the bargain; and for aye."

"How did you intend to do that?"

Nealy brightened. He loved to explain his reasoning to Greta. It was always so logical, his major and minor premises all lined up like ducklings after their mother. "I bethought myself to conjure a salamander," he said. "When Agnes and Lucius were set a-fire, the fleas would quickly perish." He heard the young man's gasp and turned to her with a smile. "And, upon my word, they would ne'er come back to bother you more."

Agnes made stiff fists by her side. "Is this a jest?

"Fleas cannot abide a high temperature," Nealy pointed out, reasonably as he thought; but all he received in return from Agnes was a look of terror.

"Are you mocking me?"

Greta sighed and shook her head. "It is only the judgment of a man who has lost all his moral anchors."

"The difficulty," the rixmister had explained, "is to strike the balance between obedience and fear. Should he fear you too greatly, he may strike out in anger. Should he fear you too little, he may not obey. Your instruments are the knout and the caress."

Nealy watched the girl and the mister with lack of interest, then turned

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his attention back to the rag doll he had been playing with. A scrap of metal affixed to its head and it was Lief ben Erik, the Great Explorer. Nealy imagined him standing in the prow of his longboat facing the spray. Sail on. Sail on. To Vinland the Good and Hy Brasil! Nealy made ocean spray noises with his mouth.

Where were Mama and Papa? They had not come with him when he left with the priest. Why did they avoid him so? Had he been bad? Had he been that *bad? They fed him and they clothed him... and they treated him like a stranger. He missed their hugs; he missed their kisses. He missed Papa's funny, booming voice and Mama's ample lap. How could he right matters; put everything back as it had been, before the wolf, before Gray Harry... if no one told him what he had done wrong?*

It wasn't fair. Yes, he had ~~killed~~ hurt Gray Harry; but that had been an accident. The gods would understand. He had offered the sacrifices to Iaveis and Dianah. He studied the doll. Dress it differently and it could be Papa, or even Mama. He made a fist and punched the doll sharply in the body. That would teach them!

Tears filled his eyes and his lower lip trembled. How could he even think of hurting Papa or Mama? He must be a very bad boy to have had such very bad thoughts. No wonder his parents did not love him any more. No wonder the other boys no longer came to play and he was alone all the time. He turned his face away so the girl and the rixmister could not see. It wasn't seemly for a boy to cry. It wasn't werile. He picked Lief the Lucky off the floor and stroked him gently, imagining again that it was Papa.

When the girl approached, he looked up suspiciously. He had heard them talking about him in whispers. The girl had shiny blond hair that hung in thick, corkscrew braids down to her waist. She wore plain butternut and beaded moccasins of a design Nealy did not recognize. Her hand clenched a knout with a large, curved knob on the end of it. Behind her, the rixmister stood with an anxious look on her face. The girl blushed lightly and curtsied.

"Ave, Master Cornelius. I height Gretl Octavia Schmuelsdottr. I came all the way up the mountain from the convent school at Lechaucaster just to play with you."

Nealy frowned and would not look at her. "You're a girl," he said. "And a vestal," he added, pointing to the jeweled dagger hanging in its sheath from a ribbon 'round her neck. He was not sure what a vestal was, only that they

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were special and came from the convent schools.

Gretl squatted by his side. "Vestals know all kinds of things. Some of them..." She paused, glanced at the mister, and blushed again. "Some of them you will appreciate when you are older."

Nealy stuck his lip out. "I want Mama."

Gretl reached out and took his hand. "I will be your mama now. I will take care of you." She hugged him; and it had been so long since any arms had compassed him that Nealy suddenly dropped the doll and hugged her back, feeling with an odd delicious tingle the funny shape of her chest pressing against him. A small, warm glow blossomed within him. Someone did like him after all.

"And later," she said, "I will be your wifman."

"I don't want a wif," he said.

"You'll learn," she said, caressing him.

"What's the stick for?" he asked.

She hugged him tighter. "You'll learn."

"He is not evil," Greta told Agnes. "He does not choose evil."

Nealy grinned. "Thank you, my dear. You say such flattering things about me." He finished his wine cup and set it by. "I'm not, I suppose," he said, scratching his chin under his beard. "I thought so myself, once. But..."

"But evil requires choice," Greta said. "And choice has been taken from him."

"And I don't miss it nary a bit," Nealy said with a nod. "If you choose, you are responsible. And responsibility..." He spared a glance at Greta's melancholy features and frowned. "Responsibility can be a terrible burden." Something was bothering Greta. Nealy could tell. Something beyond Agnes' importuning visit. Something she had brought back up the mountainside with her.

"The Other Way," said Greta, "is an awe-full and wonder-full power; but, wielded too long, power blinds us to good and evil. Each time a dweorman spells, some part of his soul is destroyed. The part that sees evil and knows to shun it. Chirurgeons who have done autopsies report that in certain regions of the brain the very fibers are seared, as if by an inner fire. Such a man..." She looked at Nealy with loving sadness. "Such a man cannot be allowed to choose."

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"The knout and the caress, eh, my dear?" Nealy grinned at his wif and rubbed himself to show where both had been applied. "They taught me to obey Greta's voice, they surely did." Sometimes, when he thought about spelling on his own, his groin would ache from the memories. Sometimes, when he thought about obeying Greta, he grew werile. "It was all done very logically." He hoped Agnes would leave soon, so that he and Greta could beek. Perhaps he should make Agnes Go Away. Twice, at Greta's command, he had made things Go Away. Once to a gang of cut-throats living in the forest beyond the Swoveberg who had raped and killed a ten-year-old girl; and once to an avalanche that had thundered down the hillside. The latter spelling had laid Nealy up for a week, numb and shivering in fever. He had felt as if great gulps of him had been sucked out into the very space between the stars. It would be much less onerous to make Alice Go Away. He looked to Greta for guidance.

But none was forthcoming. "The craeft robbed him of half himself; we robbed him then of the other," she said sadly.

Nealy was distressed. "But I don't begrudge it, dear Gretl. With it, what a monster I should be."

"Yes, in all innocence, unleashing horrors and boons with equal carelessness." Greta shook herself and looked back at Alice as if she had forgotten the young man was still there. "His choices have no moral weights, and it is urim and thummin which he would pick." Then she rose and pointed fore- and middle finger at the younger man. "Betruth yourself, Alice Josepha Runningdeer, that you will not come to my were, nor any other dweorman, ever again, except through the man's rixler."

Alice dropped to her knees and hugged Greta around the waist. "Oh, I do, I do. I betruth myself, for good and aye."

Greta lifted her to her feet. "Then go."

Alice scurried to the door.

"Don't forget the lye soap," said Nealy. "And scrub very hard." Alice gave him one last look of horror, then the door thudded shut behind her. Greta went to the door and put the bar in place, shutting the world without and them within.

Nealy ran into the wood behind the shed and knelt there rubbing himself where Gretl had struck him. Gretl was mean. All he had done was

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spell a spray of flowers to show how much he liked her. That was all, a spray of red and yellow and golden blooms to brighten up the winter months in their cabin.

But was Gretl pleased at the gesture? No, not her. Never spell without my permission! *she had cried.* Never!

Nealy clutched himself and bit down on his lip. By Hermes, that hurt! That was all she ever did, was fick him with that knout of hers, ever since the rixmister had set them up alone on the mountainside. If Papa were here, he'd make her stop; and Mama would box her ears good!

But the mountainside was far from home, far from home, and he had not seen Papa in a long, long time. Sometimes, in the night, he would sneak out of the cabin, out under the stars and look up at them, wondering if somewhere far to the south Mama and Papa were looking at them, too. Sometimes he heard their voices in the wind or in the rush of a stream, and saw their faces in the fire or a sparkling lake.

He had tried to find them once. He had made passes with his hands and the air parted before him like a curtain, and two shocked and frightened faces had turned toward him for just an instant before Gretl's knout had struck him sharply.

Maybe that had been his parents on the other side of that curtain. Maybe not.

Maybe he should teach Gretl a lesson. Turn her stick into a viper. The spelling was in the Secret Book of Moses. He imagined the stick twisting and turning and hissing in her hands and her sudden shriek of terror. It would just be for a moment. He would change the knout back before it could bite. He did not want to hurt Gretl, only scare her.

His body twinged at the thought. Ah, what a blow she would land then!

He pulled his knees up under his chin and wrapped his arms around them. The woods grew dark farther in from the clearing, permanent night even in the day, under hickories and maples taller than the pillars of the great Temple at Shawmut, home for kobolds and sprites or other creatures. Maybe he should just run away and live by himself in the forest. Some people did that. Ridge runners and mountain men.

But he would lose Gretl if he did that. He would be all alone again, as when his parents had forsaken him. He sniffed and wiped his nose on his buckskin sleeve. He should not cry. He was fourteen, a full grown man. Papa

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had only been fifteen when he became house-bound to Mama. And Gretl had promised to teach him soon what were and wif did when they were house bound to each other and that it was even better than the caresses she gave him. No, he should stay with Gretl. He was a bad boy. He had to be tamed. That was why they gave him Gretl, so she could teach him. That was why Gretl was older and knew how to touch him so it felt good. And it was why she carried the knout, too. It was all very logical. It was how you trained dogs.

GRETA BUSIED herself with the dinner preparations, setting out the flour bin and cutting a knuckle joint from the ham carcass in the cold room. Nealy admired her knifework as she cut the scraps of meat from the bone. He loved Greta's speck-and-bean. She rolled and cut the noodles fat and small and square, and she never let the snap beans stew so long they became limp.

Nealy betook himself to his favorite chair and settled in, content to await Greta's instructions.

When Greta had prepared the stew kettle, she carried it to the hearth. There she stopped and stared at the cold stones. Nealy felt her sorrow vibrate like the tolling of great cast iron bells. Nealy's bones rang with it. Greta was crying.

"What is wrong, Greta?" Nealy had never seen Greta cry. It struck him as wrong. As if the sun and the moon had come loose from their crystal spheres. Greta swung the rack out and hung the kettle on the hook. "I should have told you to start the fire," she said. "Now dinner will be late."

Only that? A silly thing to cry over. Nealy wanted to tell her that he had thought about starting the fire himself but had not done it because she had not told him to. He thought she would be proud of his prudence. Perhaps it would cheer her up. But her eyes gazed on something so far away, Nealy did not dare interrupt her. Lately, Greta had waxed melancholy, but what it was that haunted her she never spoke of.

"I could start a fire," he offered, "if you would but let me." He thought that might please her. Nealy ached to be helpful; but the one thing he knew how to do well she would not let him do for trifles.

He was prepared for rebuff, but when Greta said, "Yes. Explain how you would accomplish it," he brightened and told her all about the marching

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faggots and the salamander and the rest. When he was finished, he waited anxiously for her judgment. It could well be there was some moral wrong involved, like the time he had.... Well, it was best not to think on that. The villagers had rebuilt their houses farther from the riverbank, and the drought *had* ended. It was too bad about the children, but that could not be helped. Greta had been less experienced then.

"I see nothing wrong," Greta said at last. The worry and the sorrow filled the cabin like molasses and Nealy ached to stopper the flow before he became mired in it. He wondered if Greta knew that he could feel these things. He had told her he could, but perhaps it was like Greta explaining right and wrong to him. The words were there, but not the sense.

He donned his wolf's skin and made the cast, and a good one it was. The faggots put on a fine show, marching like legionnaires in the quick-step, centurions to the fore and levites to the rear, and even a leafy twig aloft in lieu of an eagle. A smile pierced even Greta's quiet distress.

When the wood had stacked itself and ignited in a haze of flame, Greta swung the kettle hook back over the fire. Afterward, she stood staring into the crackling blaze for a long time, and remained silent all through dinner.

After cockshut, when the dishes were scoured and put away and the cooking fire had settled into a gentle roil of soft flames, Greta went to the cloak hook and took down her sheep's wool.

"Are you going out again, dear?" Nealy asked.

Greta brought the cloak back and laid it down upon the hearth. Then she unfastened the neck of her coverslut and gown and let them fall to the flagstones. She stood there nude, one foot slightly upraised, her nakedness only accentuated by the ritual vestal's dagger dangling between her breasts on its silken cord. The firelight caused the gemstones on the handle to sparkle like small, hard flames. Nealy sighed at the sight of the soft flesh rosened by the licking flames, and awaited her summons.

When Greta held out her arms Nealy shed his buckskins with fumbling fingers and joined her on the warm outer hearthstones. They kissed—he with urgency, she with tenderness—and settled down onto the soft wool. The heat of the fire was a delicious roasting sensation on his right side. Greta took him and brought him to her and they kissed again. "Yes," said Greta, breaking her silence at last. "Yes, you may, this one last time."

Nealy knew what she meant. Eagerly, he reached out with himself,

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feeling his being engorge with the stuff of the Other Way. His pulse throbbed and the stuff ran through his veins like liquor. He sparkled like the sunlight off the chop of a gentle lake. He touched her here, and there, in places where fingers could not reach; and Greta's breath came faster and faster, in short gulps. She said, "Yes," over and over.

He had dreamed of this earlier, Nealy remembered, just before Alice had come. He had dreamed of Greta pleasuring him on the hearthstones; and he wondered if the yearning itself had brought this act to pass. Sometimes his dreams did that. Sometimes.

When he was spent, he lay by her side, gently following her contours with his touch. Greta lay with her eyes closed, making soft noises in her throat. Nealy waited for her to tell him not to pleasure her the Other Way the next time. She always forbade him, she always asked him, he always obeyed her. Nealy did not know why the pleasuring frightened her.

This time, however, she made no reference to it. Instead, she spoke in a whisper, "Nealy, dear, I've been a good wifman to you."

"No one could ask for a better," Nealy told her. "I could never bind with another."

"I know," Greta said. "I know. The rixmister paired us well. The years have been good to us." She sighed and pressed his head against her breasts, ran her fingers through his hair. "I had looked forward to spending our chair days together."

He lifted his head from its delicious pillow. "What is it?" he asked, dread bubbling through the sorrow. "What is wrong?"

She cupped one of her breasts in her hand and gazed at it sadly. "I have the cancer," she said.

The words dropped down the well of Nealy's soul. He had to swallow several times before he could speak. "Are you sure?" was all he could ask. Bad news is always questioned. Bad news is always denied.

"I saw the chirurgeon in the town. That is why I went down the mountain." She drew determination around her like a cloak. "Here, darling, Nealy..." She pushed herself to a sitting position. "Here, sit within my lap."

Nealy did as he was bid. He sat on the sheepskin between her legs and leaned back against her. Greta pulled his head once more against her breasts and Nealy jerked slightly at the touch.

"Do not fret, dear. You cannot hurt me; not by leaning against me." Greta was silent for a time and Nealy contented himself with listening to her

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breathing. Then she said, "I felt the lumps at the freshening of Hunter's Moon. I was not sure, at first. I did not want to believe it, at first. But the chirurgeon confirmed it."

Nealy twisted his head and looked up into her face. Twin tears left dark trails down her cheeks. "Is there anything I can do, dear? Are there spells? I know of none; but..."

"No, Nealy. No. You would have to know the cancer as well as you know the owl or the wind...or Alice Runningdeer's fleas. No one knows what the cancer is, or why it does what it does. How can you spell what you cannot name?"

"True names...," Nealy said. "I could spell black," he offered. "I could weave an unnamed spell. If the known does not help, we must try the unknown."

"The Black Unknown? We dare not.... Dare not.... Nealy, no dweorman may spell upon the body of a rixler. That is a geas that may not, must not be lifted..."

"But..." Nealy frowned in concentration. "But, you will die. Surely...."

Greta seized him and held him tight against her, nearly crushing his breath from him. "I know. I know. I have lived with death for three tendays, now. I have grown...accustomed to his breath. Comes the moment, I will even welcome him. The chirurgeon's potions...I may ask for something stronger, on that day."

Nealy pondered Greta's death. Who would make his meals? Who would pleasure him? Who would make his decisions? "Oh, Gretl," he said, using her childhood name. "Oh, Gretl," and his own tears came now as he conjured up his future in his drawn and quartered soul. "I do not know what I shall do without you!"

Greta hugged him even tighter between her breasts. He could feel the heat of them, feel the hardness of their tips, smell the delicious smell of flesh. "I do," he heard Greta say.

Something felt different. Something was missing in their embrace. He felt the fleshy softness against his cheek. "Why, Gretl," he said. "Your vestal's dagger... Have you taken it off?"

"Lean your head back as far as you can, darling," he heard her say.

It gave him such pleasure to obey her. A fine blade, it tickled; rather like a feather drawn across his throat.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Half the Day is Night, by Maureen F. McHugh, Tor, 1994, 352 pp., $21.95

I'VE BEEN writing these bimonthly columns for two years now, and it's been an educational experience. Two things I've learned are that I don't believe in absolutes as much as I thought I did, but also that I have strong prejudices that I'm not ashamed of expressing. I hope it's been an interesting ride for you as well.

I find I don't have as much time as I used to: increasing responsibilities at work and a new baby have left me with much less time to write. I need to devote more of my attention to fiction, so I've made a deal with the Gracious Editrix to cease writing this column regularly. I have agreed to write an occasional essay in the future, and look forward to those opportunities. In the meantime, I want to thank Ed Ferman and Kris Rusch for asking me to step at least temporarily into the shoes of such illustrious reviewers as Algis Budrys, John Clute, Joanna Russ, Alfred Bester, Avram Davidson and Damon Knight, to name just a few.

In recent years there's been a lot of discussion from knowledgeable people about the decline or possible extinction of science fiction. Strangely, since I am not noted as the most optimistic of men, I find I don't agree. During these two years I have received tons of formula fiction, far outnumbering the books of quality. But on the other hand, there is more good science fiction being written now than has ever been written. Even those who bemoan the lack of hard sf are, I think, letting their memories give the past an unduly rosy color. The hard sf being written by Gregory

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Benford, David Brin, Greg Bear, Charles Sheffield, Bruce Sterling and others is by almost any standard I can think of better than the hard sf written by Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke, to say nothing of George O. Smith. This is not to dishonor those writers who invented Modern Science Fiction. But nostalgia is not a good basis for critical judgment.

And that's not to say that I don't have my worries about the state of sf publishing and publishing in general. Among the mountains of formula books I've received may have been any number of works of genuine merit, but the cookie-cutter packaging they receive would demand a stronger man than I to persevere long enough to find that out. Given the hard realities of the commercial world and the overwhelming pressures to write product, it's amazing to me how many good writers are willing to do much more than the minimum it takes to get published today.

Despite any arthritis that has set into the field, if I learned anything, it's that.

A case in point is Maureen McHugh. McHugh's first novel, *China Mountain Zhang*, which I reviewed in my first *F&SF* column, was one of the best books of 1992. It's only appropriate that I lead off this last of my regular columns with her second novel.

China Mountain Zhang, episodic and multifaceted, followed half a dozen tangentially related characters while focusing on one. This structure resulted in a panorama of a future society as much as a conventionally plotted novel of a hero's adventures. *Half the Day is Night* alternates viewpoints between two characters, and although it shares with *China Mountain* the impulse to show us an alternative future, because it stays closer to these characters it follows a much more conventional story line.

Mayla Ling, scion of a wealthy family, is a banker in the undersea nation of Caribe. Caribe consists of several multi-level cities constructed on the bottom of the Caribbean Ocean, a technologically dependent undersea Haiti, a third-world nation of rich and poor. Some years before the book begins an abortive revolution led to an authoritarian government, whose blue-and-white uniformed police enforce the repressive laws and against which various radical movements run terrorist actions. Bankers are targets, and so Mayla fires her ex-lover and protector Tim Bennet and hires French citizen David Dai as her personal bodyguard.

David, of Vietnamese descent, a

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veteran of several French conflicts in Africa, is new to the undersea environment. Much of his half of the story concerns his attempts to adjust to life at the bottom of the ocean, where the air is mixed with helium, the temperature is always cold and the sun never shines.

Mayla is negotiating a takeover of a company in the neighboring corporate-dominated city of Marincite. The plot springs from this wheeling and dealing. It's refreshing to have a heroine who's a banker instead of a secret agent, and action that revolves around a leveraged buyout instead of a physical conflict (though both physical conflict and secret agents make their appearance in this story).

Mayla is unaccustomed to danger and not very good at navigating the underworld she eventually gets thrust into. In places she seems too naive for someone in her position and upbringing. Maybe her upper middle class existence has protected her from the corruption the politics of such a nation state would generate. Her naiveté and David's inexperience with Caribe culture lead them into several tight circumstances, most notably a meeting with a psychopathic drug dealer that quivers with tension. In these scenes I particularly liked the fact that McHugh's characters seldom act with the aplomb of movie heroes. In general the novel shows the same sure characterization, even in its minor figures, as did McHugh's first novel.

That said I have to say that I found the plot less interesting than the people and the place. I almost wish we could do away with the intrigue, as it seems disconnected from McHugh's potentially fascinating background, and in the end detracts from it. Although it has similar complexity, Caribe feels less real than the China-dominated world of her earlier novel, as if McHugh, wor-

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rying about her story line, skimped on the imaginative investment such an altered environment demands of the sf writer. For instance, the subs that carry workers back and forth between Marincite and Caribe are crowded with people sitting two-by-two along an aisle, leaning their heads against windows. They might as well be busses for the way they are described (then again, *sub* is *bus* spelled backwards). The poor districts that exist on lower levels in the cities, except for passing reference to inferior air, in their warehouses and restaurants and street life might as well be the barrios of surface cities.

At times this led me to ask the question every sf writer should be terrified of his reader asking: is this futuristic setting necessary, or is it merely a device to make the story more science fictional? Could this novel be set in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, as profitably as at the bottom of the sea?

To be fair, McHugh gives us a lot of detail on the methods of construction, the transportation systems, the political setup of her world. Still, big questions remain unaddressed: what is the economic justification of these undersea cities? Is such a city likely to look so much like the third world?

On the other hand, the tug of her background at times threatens to derail McHugh's skilled characterization, and the narrative resolves itself into a series of set pieces. *Half the Day is Night* offers scenes of underwater construction, illicit drug dealing, corporate financial intrigue, the tense movements of fugitives trying to escape a repressive government, and a delightful rip on the limitations of virtual reality war games. Not all of these pieces are as well integrated as they might be. It's as if McHugh is running the characters through episodes designed to expose them to various interesting aspects of her future world.

I'm not sure whether this is a flaw or a virtue. Like *China Mountain Zhang*, this multifariousness gives *Half the Day*'s resolution some of the ragged nature of real life. So, for instance, at first the groundwork is laid for a love triangle, but nothing much is made of it. In David's first undersea outing with Tim, the scene is set for a later underwater confrontation that never appears. Mayla and David at times seem almost incidental to each other. One part of me wants to commend McHugh for avoiding the obligatory love affair, but what is in its place? Is this story about David's political experience, Mayla's naiveté? About David from the surface, Mayla from below the sea? About Mayla rich and privileged,

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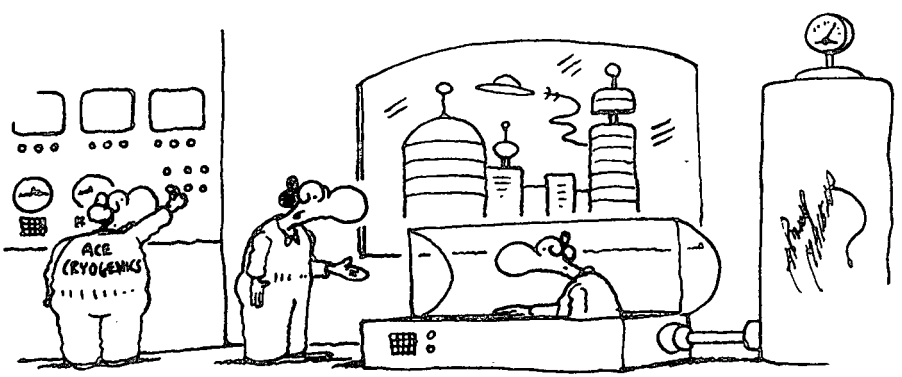
David poor and hardened? Is it about authoritarian politics? Corporate corruption? A contrast between the surface world and the futuristic undersea life? The third world vs. the first? *China Mountain Zhang* had a thematic backbone: the search for identity of all of its varied characters. Despite its more focused plot, the unity of *Half the Day is Night* is harder to find.

Having raised these objections, I don't want to leave the impression *Half The Day is Night* is not a good book. It's just that I'm holding it to the highest of standards. Instead of repeating herself, McHugh has moved toward a different kind of novel, and though I find the result somewhat less satisfying, this seems profoundly the right artistic decision to me. *Half the Day is Night* contains excellent writing, intriguing characters, well drawn action, and a provocative social and technological background only tangentially explored. It marks a respectable follow-up to *China Mountain Zhang*, but also shows the difficulties of building on such an impressive debut. I don't want to load Maureen McHugh down with unfair expectations; still, whether she moves in the direction of conventional plotting or into large scale social extrapolation, I expect her to be one of the genre's best over the next twenty years.



"There's good news and bad news. They found a cure for your disease, but there isn't a single mesage on your answering machine."

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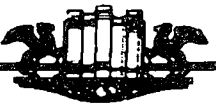

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Wild Blood, by Nancy A. Collins, Roc, 1994, 304pp, $4.99, Paperback, ISBN 0-451-45432-4

AFTER A LONG stint scripting the *Swamp Thing* for Vertigo comics, Nancy Collins has returned to her own writing with a new Pretenders novel. The Pretenders are supernatural entities that hide among humanity, mimicking us as they prey upon us. We were first introduced to Collins' take on these creatures in her brilliant *Sunglasses After Dark* (Onyx, 1989) in which she explained everything from vampires to ogres with her new mythology.

This time out, she leaves the vampires behind and tells a coming-of-age story of a young adopted boy who discovers that he's a werewolf — or a *vargr*, in the terminology of the Pretenders. Skinner Cade's adventures as he changes from being a rather innocent farm boy attending college into what he perceives as a monster is a fascinating, if gruesome story of murder, sadism and betrayals that won't be for everyone. Collins gets quite graphic, where the story warrants it, but if you stick with it, you'll discover that all the carnage she depicts was necessary for the eventual redemption of one of the characters to make any sense.

Along the way, Collins also manages to confront some serious social problems, utilizing the backgrounds of some of the *vargr*, those who were born outside of the pack and were victims before they became hunters, as a commentary on how, in our society, today's abuse victim can become tomorrow's predator.

But it's not all doom and gloom and blood splattered across the page. Collins has a breezy prose style, and the ability to make her readers smile as often as they want to turn away. And while the actions of some of the characters are utterly despicable, she takes a firm stance between what's right and wrong. The evil some do is balanced against the good in other

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characters, and the possibility of redemption exists for even the darkest of heart.

She also broadens the scope of her Pretenders to incorporate a metaphor of the European colonization of the Americas by introducing a breed of Pretender native to this continent, the *coyotero* or were-coyote, and their centuries' struggle against the more savage *vargr*. If not based on actual folklore, the *coyotero* are a fascinating creation, the sort of thing you run across in a novel and can almost believe is real — or at least you wish it was.

Far be it from me to suggest what another author should do, but it struck me as I was reading the sections of *Wild Blood* that dealt with the *coyotero* that they would make excellent subject matter for a book all on their own. And who knows, maybe they will.

Blue Motel: Narrow Houses Volume 3, edited by Peter Crowther, Little, Brown & Co., 1994, 390pp, Hardcover, ISBN 0-316-91180-1

Northern Frights 2, edited by Don Hutchison, Mosaic Press, 1994, 222pp, Trade paperback, ISBN 0-88962-564-6

The original anthology market still appears to be a healthy animal, particularly in the horror field. This makes sense since, for all the proliferation of horror novels since King reinvented the beast in the seventies, the heartblood of horror has always been firmly rooted in the short story. The length is as suitable to the ghost story and the quiet build-up of a sense of menace as it is to the shock of a more graphic storyline or the sudden terror of a twist ending.

And happily, for writers and editors, readers can't seem to get enough of them.

Since American aficionados will be familiar with most of the collections, anthologies and small press magazines that abound in their own country, I thought it might be interesting to investigate what's going on above the forty-ninth parallel and across the Atlantic. Both countries have proved to be fertile ground, each claiming its own distinctive series.

Peter Crowther's *Narrow Houses* series features many names familiar to American readers; what sets it apart from its North American counterparts is its premise — the stories take their inspiration from superstitions — and Crowther's uncanny ability to attract the high caliber of writing that now fills a third volume. It's hard to go wrong when your contributors include Ursula K.

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Le Guin, Ian McDonald, Brian W. Aldiss, Storm Constantine and Dennis Etchison — the latter providing an introduction that is both literate and illuminating and should be required reading for all aspiring writers.

Of duds there are only a couple — and this, in itself, is subjective, of course. Much as I admire Michael Moorcock's work — particularly the books unrelated to his Eternal Champion series — I found his contribution here to be a little too meandering, while Jonathan Aycliffe's "The Reiver's Lament" was so predictable in its outcome that his well-crafted prose couldn't salvage the story for me.

Of winners there are many, from Ken Wisman's tender "Grandma Babka's Christmas Ginger and the Good Luck/Bad Luck Leshy" to the evocative poem "House of Omens" with which Jessica Amanda Salmonson opens the anthology. The stories range through time ("The Legend of Pope Joan" by David V. Barrett) and space (Le Guin's "Betrayals"); they are hardboiled ("Quarrey's Luck" by Max Allan Collins) and weird (Aldiss' "The Dream of Antigone"); they deal with voodoo ("The Curse" by Ed Gorman), ghosts (James Lovegrove's "Rosemary for Remembrance") and sociopaths ("Green" by Mark Morris).

In short, the palette is varied, the artists skilled, and there is rarely a stumble as these women and men apply their words to the canvas of these pages. The entertainment value is high in this anthology, but so is the intellectual stimulation that Etchison calls for in his introduction and the writers' attempts to illuminate the human condition.

The stories in *Northern Frights 2* are a little more uneven in terms of their quality. It's true that there are wonderfully insightful and literate contributions from the likes of Charles Grant, Chet Williamson and Mary E. Choo in its pages, but there are also offerings from Hugh B. Cave and Edward D. Hoch that because of their old-fashioned prose and style of characterization had me checking the copyright page and being surprised to discover that they weren't reprints from the golden age of the pulps, but new stories.

The theme of this series edited by Don Hutchison is as simple as Crowther's: the stories have to have a Canadian angle. This can mean that the author is a Canadian (such as Victoria writer Dale L. Sproule whose "Fourth Person Singular" could have been set anywhere to work), used to live in Canada (Garfield Reeves-Stevens who doesn't do anything for

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the Toronto tourist industry with "The Eddies") or that the story has a Canadian setting (as in Williamson's "Other Errors, Other Times"; Williamson is an American, but his story of ghostly self-redemption is set in Northern Ontario).

This can make for some tenuous stretches to fit within the boundaries of the anthology at times, but that's not why some of the stories don't work for me. Sean Doolittle's "These Broken Wings" plays on the old stereotype of American hunters coming north to bag a few trophies but when the prey turns out to be angels instead of more traditional game, the concept didn't seem so much poignant to me as goofy. On the other hand James Powell's "The Code of the Poodles" with its "talking" animals (they communicate by means of a kind of semaphore) should have been goofy, but turned out to be quite entertaining.

In other places the ability of the writers at their craft simply doesn't measure up, but this is more than compensated for by such glorious feasts of style as pervade Grant's take on what it's like to be old in "Sometimes, in the Rain," or "Emancipation" by Cindy Geddes in which a young woman gets closer to nature than perhaps she initially intended.

As in *Blue Motel,* the style of stories varies widely; we are taken from the B-movie threat of David Nickle's "The Sloan Men" to the all-too-real abusive relationship that lies at the heart of Shirley Meier's "Ice"; from the fascinating play on traditional Chinese legends in Choo's "Feast of Ghosts" to the surrealist take on suppressed memories in Gemma Files' wonderfully titled "Mouthful of Pins."

Northern Frights 2 isn't quite as strong overall as Crowther's anthology, but both books have enough quality material in them to satisfy even the jaded reader with the added benefit of not only reacquainting us with some favorite authors, but also introducing us to a handful of new ones whose work I know many of us will be searching out in the future.

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Steve Perry's imagination has been skewed as long as I've known him. And it has served him in good stead, both in his print career and his television career. His work on Batman: the Animated Series *has earned him an Emmy nomination. His most recent novel,* The Forever Drug, *has just appeared from Ace Books.*

About the story, Steve writes, "A couple of summers ago, my house needed repainting. After experiencing major shock at what it would cost to pay somebody to do it, I undertook the job myself. I mean, I could rent a power washer, buy the paint, a sprayer, dropcloths and stirrers and everything and still wind up spending one-tenth what a housepainter was asking. Such a deal. Why on Earth would I do anything else."

Steve claims that the story comes from "that rather unpleasant experience." But he fails to mention that he lives in an Oregon neighborhood similar to the one in the story and — well, we'll let him call this fiction if he would like.

Just Ask

By Steve Perry

SAM PADDED DOWN THE hall into the kitchen, rubbing at his face, half asleep. He was still in his pajamas, which at this time of year consisted of a pair of so-old-they-were-gray jockey shorts with the waistband stretched out. It was nine o'clock, but hey, he *was* on vacation, wasn't he?

The kitchen smelled wonderful. Carly was making biscuits. Whole wheat, something nobody else he knew got right and something Carly had been doing perfectly for twenty years. No lead bread here.

"Morning, hon," she said brightly. "Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

He waited, but she didn't say anything. He had to know, so he asked.

"You, uh, been out this morning?"

"I brought in the paper."

"And...?"

"They're talking about raising taxes again down in Salem."

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He glared at her while he poured a cup of coffee from the thermos. "Thank you, Connie Chung. What about the *house*?"

She shrugged. "The house? Ah. Well. You know."

"Shit!"

He started toward the door, cup in hand.

"You better put some clothes on. What will the neighbors think?"

"Ask me if I *care* what the neighbors think."

He didn't really look at the house until he was almost to the end of the driveway. Then he turned and got an eyeful.

It was yellow again.

He took a big sip of coffee, then shook his head. Well, shit.

Yellow.

Again.

Okay, fine, it wasn't *yellow*, if your idea of yellow was Tweety Bird or mustard, it was more of a *sand* color, maybe a little darker than a manila folder, but as far as he was concerned, that was yellow enough and that stinking hue ran all the way to its rotten heart.

And, given that he had spent most of yesterday and the day before painting the front of the house with Sears' best Weatherbeater™ latex in a nice warm blue — some gray in it — it was *really* beginning to piss him off.

Hathorne came out next door and cast a baleful gaze at Sam in his underwear. Hathorne was sixty-three, retired early from the state. He ambled over to where Sam stood and looked at the front of the house.

"I saw you out here yesterday with the sprayer and all. I thought you were going to paint it blue," he said.

Hathorne was on the board of the neighborhood association and thus privy to the architectural committee's necessary pre-approval of all painting or renovations in the subdivision. You couldn't cut down a dead bush without getting permission from those yahoos. They were all a bunch of Nazis, as far as Sam was concerned. Not counting Sam and Carly and Tabitha and that one black family down the street, the whole of Beaverton was white Republicans as far as the eye could see and they liked "earth tones" here in the lovely Four Seasons development. Newcomers from SoCal quickly recognized Beaverton as Orange County north and that it was held up by pillars of ticky-tacky conformity. You could shoot the new adventures of *Leave it to Beaver* here, if you wanted. He still wasn't sure how they'd wound up living here.

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Something to do with the school district Carly wanted for Tabby. Carly usually got what she wanted.

"I *did* paint it blue. Somebody must have snuck over here in the middle of the night and repainted it yellow again."

"I wouldn't call that yellow," Hathorne said, looking at the house. "More of a sand color. Manila, maybe — "

"Whatever! Anyway, this is the second time it happened."

"How odd."

Sam sipped at his coffee again. "Yeah, well, it may be odd, but it isn't funny."

"Well. I've got to go. You gonna paint it again?"

"Damned right I am."

"Might put on some clothes. Otherwise you might give old Mrs. Jackson across the street another heart attack."

When he finished the front, late in the afternoon, Sam went inside to wash up. It was warm out, a nice spring day, and the paint was already drying in places. It had been an uneventful afternoon, except for the usual run of the Beaverton Fire Rescue truck to old Mrs. Jackson's house for her monthly case of the vapors. Old Mrs. Jackson was eighty-eight. He expected she would outlive everybody in the subdivision, her "heart attacks" notwithstanding. He'd seen those young delivery men going into her house and not coming out for hours at a time. He had his suspicions that she had something going with one of the fire department medics, too. Maybe he should get stock in J&J's KY factory — the old lady must buy the stuff by the barrel.

"How is it going?" Carly asked. She was fixing supper: mashed potatoes, pork chops, broccoli. The smell was exquisite. Carly might just be the best cook on the planet.

"Just fine. Where are the sleeping bags?"

"In the hall closet. Why?"

"Because I am going to camp out front tonight and watch for whoever thinks he's so hilariously funny. And I'm taking the shotgun with me."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oregon law says you can shoot anybody who sneaks over and paints your house in the middle of the night."

The eyebrow went higher.

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"Well, if it doesn't, it should."

"Why don't you just forget it and enjoy the rest of your week off? I like the old color just fine. And it isn't in bad shape."

"Puke yellow. Baby crap yellow. Pus yellow."

"It isn't yellow, it's more of a sand color. Maybe manila. And I like it."

Their fifteen-year-old daughter Tabitha wandered into the kitchen, a scruffy vision in black, her long hair pulled back in a pony tail. A beautiful child and the image of her mother, save for the ratty clothes.

"You just get up?" Sam asked.

"Nah, I been up for a while. Half an hour, at least."

"Jesus."

"Spring vacation, Dad. I get to sleep late. So, when's supper gonna be ready, Mom?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Great. How'd the painting go, Dad? Was it yellow again?"

"It was. And I bet it was one of your friends who did it."

"Come on, Dad, just because they rolled the place *one time* with toilet paper — "

"What about the load of OCA political signs?"

"My friends didn't do that."

"Hah!"

"Anyway, nobody I know would waste that much energy for a joke."

That was probably true, Tabby and most of her friends made garden slugs look like track stars on steroids. But he said, "Maybe. We'll see." He mimicked jacking a shell into the action of a pump shotgun, pointed the imaginary weapon and said, "Blam!"

Tabby flicked a quick gaze at the ceiling. "*Really*, Dad." She headed for the television.

"Give my love to Oprah," he yelled after her.

"Really, Dad, Oprah has been over for *hours*. It's Geraldo."

At about midnight, hunched under the small oak tree in the sleeping bag without — at Carly's insistence — the shotgun, Sam dozed off. Not more than five minutes, he checked his watch when he jerked awake suddenly. Five minutes tops. Okay, six minutes.

The house was yellow again.

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He stared at it. No way. No way could somebody paint the whole front of an entire house in six minutes. Maybe if they had a sprayer the size of a Mack truck and the Flash was running it, but it would have to make a lot of noise even so, and no way could they drive up, paint the house and leave in five — okay, *six* — goddamned minutes. Not without waking him up. No way, no how, no ma'am.

Well...damn.

Carly was still awake reading when he went inside. Another of those get-your-shit-together books. The path to somewhere or the other. The joy of breathing.

"How's it going out there, Mr. Bond?" She hummed a bit of the theme from *Goldfinger*.

"It's yellow again."

"Ah."

"'Ah?' All you can say is 'Ah?'"

She looked back at her book. "Well. What are you going to do now?"

"Do? Do? Nothing right this minute. In the morning, however, I am going to Sears, that's what I'm going to do. We'll just see about this."

The salesman at Sears, a barely post-pimple boy of maybe twenty, had never heard of anything like it before. Nor had he heard much of anything about anything before, Sam reasoned.

"Uh, maybe I should, like, you know, let you, like, uh, talk to my manager?"

Never had a shotgun when you needed one. "Uh, yeah, why, like, don't you, uh, *do* that?"

America was doomed. When this kid's generation took over, they'd probably feed all the old folks to the lions. If Generation-Z lived that long, Sam would probably be glad to hurl himself into the cage with the big cats. Not, "You want fries with that?" but, "Fries? What are fries?" Even pictures on the buttons wouldn't be enough. Doomed.

The manager, a woman of sixty with hair dyed the color of a palomino horse's mane and thirty pounds too much weight, all of it below her waist, shook her head. She'd never heard anything like it, either. "What exactly is it you want us to do, Mr. — ah — ?"

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"Sewall. Sam Sewall. The paint is guaranteed for fifteen years, isn't it?"

"Well, yes..."

"Then if it evaporates off in five minutes, something is wrong with it. I want it replaced."

"Replaced."

"Right. I'll swap you my twelve gallons of unopened paint for twelve new gallons."

She shrugged. "All right. I guess we can do that."

"Some freak chemical thing?" Hathorne said.

"Yep," Sam said.

"Must be pretty rare."

Sam refilled the airless sprayer with another thick dollop of the heavy latex paint, screwed the lid back on. Got paint all over his hands. "Nah, it happens all the time, people at Sears said. Mostly with *earth* tones."

Hathorne glared at him. "I didn't make the board policy, Sewall."

"Yeah, but you help enforce it. The Board doesn't even have a color wheel we can choose from. It's all inside your minds, you should pardon the expression."

"We know what's right. You want a purple house with pink spots, go live in Eugene with all the other old hippies."

Sam didn't speak to that. He flexed his right index finger. It was getting sore, having to hold the sprayer's trigger down all this time.

GOOD MORNING!" Sam said as he strolled into the kitchen. He felt so good he had already showered and shaved and gotten dressed in his paint-spattered overalls. He should be able to finish the sides and most of the back of the house today, if he hustled.

Carly was testing a drop of pancake batter on the cast iron grill. The metal was nicely seasoned: the batter sizzled. Great smell. "Hi. You want to eat first or start repainting first?"

Sam blinked. It took a second for what she'd said to sink in.

"Did you say, 'Start *re*painting?' As in, paint over a part I already painted?"

"Oh, dear."

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He stormed out front.

Son-of-a-*bitch*!

Back inside, Carly said, "You want Karo or maple syrup on your pancakes?"

"The house is yellow again! Yellow, yellow, yellow!"

"You're upset."

"Upset?! Why would I be upset? Just because I've got the only house on the fucking planet that can't be painted? Maybe I should go on Donahue — Men Whose Houses Change Colors in the Middle of the Fucking Night!"

"I think they already did that show. I'm sorry, did you say Karo or maple syrup?"

"Karo."

Jesus.

"Whatcha doon, Dad?"

"A scientific experiment. I'm painting this piece of plywood here blue and I'm going to paint a swatch on the front of the house blue and see what happens in the morning."

"Cool."

Yep. Civilization was doomed. Doomed. Might as well start writing his will now.

In the morning, the plywood was still a nice warm blue, some gray in it.

The house, of course, was spotlessly, disgustingly, putridly *yellow*.

"Now whatcha doon, Dad?"

"I'm setting up the video camera to tape the front of the house. I'll come out and change the tape in the middle of the night. I am going to see exactly how the damned house does it."

"Cool. You aren't worried somebody might steal the camera?"

"No. It's wired to explode if anybody but me touches it. Better tell all your thieving friends. One finger on it and...*kaboom*!"

"*Really*, Dad."

Sam ran the tape on fast forward. Three hours of the blue patch on his house. A couple of moths flew by; once, Carly's coal black cat padded past,

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taking no apparent notice of either the fresh paint or the camera. She called the cat "Djavul;" when she wasn't around, Sam called the nasty old tom "Feces."

All of a sudden the blue spot vanished.

He rewound the tape and played it at normal speed. The blue patch disappeared so fast he missed it. He rewound the tape again, ran it on slow.

Missed it again.

The third time he rewound the tape, he advanced it one frame at a time.

The blue spot vanished between two frames. Like a light blinking out, that fast.

One frame it was there, by the next frame it was gone. Poof. Unless it really was the Flash doing it, it wasn't possible. And even the Flash would have to hurry.

Jesus H. Christ on a pogo stick!

Sam called his college roommate Will Stoughton at the Dow Research Lab in Hillsboro.

"Will, did you get a chance to look at those samples I sent you?"

"Yup."

"And...?"

"Well, Sam, old son, I can give you the technical breakdown, if you want — binders and pigments and adhesives and all like that — but what you have here is two different colors of exterior house paint."

"I *know* that. Is there anything unusual about them?"

"Nope, not that I can tell. The fresh blue is standard latex. Sears Weatherbeater™ would be my guess."

"What about the dried yellow chips?"

"You mean the sand-colored stuff? Actually, it's more of a manila — "

"Spare me the shade comparisons. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Nope. Plain ole paint, just like the other."

"If I were to slap some of the blue on my house over the yellow, how long would it be likely to stay there?"

"Assuming nobody scraped it off, and given the Oregon weather, twelve, maybe fifteen years."

"Well, shit."

"A problem?"

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"Yeah. I've put this paint on the front of my house six times and each time it disappeared by the next morning. Just...went away."

"Hmm. That's odd."

"Is that your considered Ph.D.-in-chemistry opinion, Dr. Stoughton? Odd, you say? Odd? What could cause that?"

"Damned if I know. I suppose you could come up with something like vanishing ink. You know that stuff we used to squirt on each other as kids, bought it out of the back of comics? Loses its color when exposed to the air?"

"Yeah?"

"Thing is, this isn't it. This is just plain old paint. No way."

"What about radon or something?"

"Sammy, boy, if you had enough radioactivity in your house to bleach the paint off the wall overnight you and your family would all look like burnt pork chops."

"Well...shit."

"Interesting, though. Keep me posted on it, would you? I gotta go now. Oprah is coming on. They're doing 'Women Who Pretend to Be Men and Then Sleep With Other Women.'"

"And you supposedly an intelligent human being. Goodbye, Will."

Sam brooded in his study for most of the afternoon, thinking about the problem. Unless something drastic happened, the house was going to *stay* that baby crap yellow. He'd run out of ideas.Why? still loomed unanswered. Obviously he'd pissed off some bored god with nothing better to do than sit around zapping his paint job.

Finally, around supper time, he figured it out. The only thing that made any sense, all things considered. He didn't know why he hadn't seen it before.

Carly was in the kitchen, cooking fried chicken.

"Hi, honey. Feeling better?"

"Yeah. I think I figured it out."

She turned and gave him the raised eyebrow.

"It's you, isn't it? You're a witch, aren't you?"

Carly turned back to the bubbling chicken. She began to carefully turn the pieces. They were all a nice, golden brown on the bottom. She was a great cook. She never burned anything. Never. That was a major clue. He really should have seen it before. It wasn't natural not to ever burn anything you

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cooked. And whole wheat — anybody who could make whole wheat biscuits that tasted good, well, that wasn't natural, either. *Ipso facto.*

"Well, actually, yes. I am a witch."

He knew it! "Jesus, Carly! We've been married for twenty years! You would think that if a man's wife was a witch she would at least let him know it, wouldn't you?"

"You never asked."

"I never asked? Jesus, I never asked if you could turn into a fire-breathing dragon, either!"

"Are you asking me if I can?"

He stared at her. "No. I don't want to know. Come on, Carly, you could have said something!"

She shrugged. "It never came up."

He turned away, shaking his head. "So it is you who's been making the paint vanish every night. I been out there busting my butt and you're wriggling your nose or whatever it is witches do and disappearing it!"

"I like the color the house is," she said. "I told you."

"But — but — "

"You didn't ask me if I wanted to change it. You *announced* that you were going to paint the house, then you went to Sears and picked the color out, also without asking me."

He turned back around, surprised. "Did I?"

"You did. It didn't occur to you that I might have an opinion?"

"I thought you'd like the blue."

"Well, I do like it, actually. But you should have *asked.*"

He thought about it for a minute. Well. She had him there. That was true. "Oh. Oh. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I *should* have asked. I apologize."

Carly stirred the chicken around a little. "Really?"

"Really. I'm sorry. What can I say? I'm no Alan Alda."

She smiled, but it was a little one.

"All right. Where is my sword?"

She looked at him. "Sword?"

"Yeah, so I can fall on it. *Mea culpa.* I will kiss your feet and then I will do the honorable thing. Me 'n' Brutus 'n' Cassius, we're honorable men, you know."

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She laughed and he knew he was off the hook.

"So, can you do anything else? Magic, I mean?"

She laughed again. "You don't really think that being able to make love five times in one night is *natural* at your age, do you?"

"Hey, I'm only forty-six." He put his arms around her. "Where is Tabby? Didn't she go to the movies? I'll show you natural."

"The chicken will burn."

"Let it."

They didn't make it to the bedroom until the third time. And, of course, the chicken didn't burn, either.

And when Sam woke up the next morning, the outside of the house was a nice, warm blue — with a little gray in it.

All he'd had to do was ask.

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Sally Caves last appeared in our pages in July of 1991 with her story "Fetch Felix." Since then, she has had a story air on Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, *and has published a book on medieval poetry.*

The cat in "Ketamine" was based on Sally's own polydactyl tabby cat. About the story, Sally writes, "I first read about ketamine *in Daniel Dennett's essay on 'Why You Can't Build a Computer that Can Feel Pain' (in* Brainstorms*), and in Europe I heard the horrific tale about the girl and her diabolical seducer — which I embellished, of course. The rest of the story is my own ailuromania (afflicted since childhood), morbid curiosity, airy nonsense and black humor."*

Ketamine

By Sally Caves

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.
— *The Gospel of Thomas*

"The gods have retractable claws."
— *The Gospel of Bast*

The Doctor

I HAVE FOUND OUT ELECTRICITY. Winds from the north, and I can't seem to shake this damn cough. The doctor is sliding his cold stethoscope under my left breast and I hitch away from him, shoulder jerking. "Sorry," I murmur.

"Breathe deeply."

I tell him nervously that cats have been many an inspiration to poets and prisoners. I tell him that allergies are a kind of psychic electricity. My humors meet my cat's humors and sparks fly. The Egyptians must have had special prayers to placate their little gods who could make you weep and sneeze, driving the very soul out of your nostrils.

Unimpressed by my verbal wit, the doctor says: "You still have the cat?"

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I have no intention of booting the cat. The doctor's sending me to an allergist anyway. "And an allergist is going to tell you that you treat an allergy first by getting rid of the irritant," he pronounces.

My left shoulder strains to meet my chin.

I rescued the irritant from execution: a paper-thin, scrofulous little tabby that had rubbed her face bald against the wires of her kennel. She was so hoarse with calling she could only whisper. "MiAA," she cried through the din of shrieking and barking that fills the halls of the Humane Society. When I ordered them to take her out she climbed me like a tree and tucked her wailing head under my chin. I could feel the sharp blades of her pelvis, the flaky matter under her tail. She smelled like diarrhea. She clung on as though she'd stapled herself to me. How could I refuse this suppliant?

"She has extra toes," I said, my shoulder gyrating out of control.

"That's supposed to be lucky," said the attendant. He was looking at me obliquely, the way all strangers do, pretending not to see anything weird. I took Mia home and became an irritant to my friend Dennis and everyone else.

Mia is about six months old, now, and still underweight, yet there's hair on her face and her tail has filled out. She's an ordinary silver tabby with big gallumphing feet but her face has the markings of her feral ancestry: a lynx has striped her forehead, Egyptian kohl accents either eye and has left its traces on her cheeks. Out of this mask she smiles at me in that cat way with half-closed lids. She's regained her voice. She has one word of many intonations. There is her seductive "miah?" that ends in a rising trill, there is her "mi-AH" that is an announcement, and the sweetly intimate "mi-ah" that is mimed. "M—!" she smacks silently, disclosing the pink, tender source of her humming. Mad poet Smart said of his cat Jeoffrey: "For by stroaking of him I have found out electricity."

The electrical humors kicked in within days: a tickling under my chin, a tingling in my sinuses, an itchy swarm of bugs across my eyeballs that made me feel twitchier than ever, and, lately, a thick feeling in my bronchial tubes. The doctor doesn't like this. Neither does Dennis, but for different reasons. I'm used to Dennis's little seizures of meanness, but it stung when he told me that, aside from my neurological problems and the condition of my arms and legs (which he's very generously put up with), my constantly blowing my nose and clearing my throat was making me sexually unattractive to him.

I told him to go hump a mannequin.

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It's unfair, this immune system. Especially when it's always protected me from humans. So I'll be damned if I know why Mia started changing into a girl because it didn't diminish my allergies one whit. Or my tics.

The Philosopher

Winds from the northwest; they rattle through the naked branches of the Upstate forest bringing sleet and rain. A brown woodland surrounds the Upland Meadows Complex — five staggered rows of beige stucco buildings. I sit on the couch in my apartment that an inheritance from my deceased father pays for, and watch Mia play with a tight little pink rubber band that came off the clump of broccoli I bought last night from Wegmans. She scoops it up with her lucky extra claws and throws it over her shoulder where it lands, plick, on the linoleum floor and she pounces on it, pretending it's a little fish she's dished up out of a river. Dennis is in the bathroom. I look around the living room at the unsold webs of my creation. Not a surface remains that I haven't festooned with fabric sculptures, as if I can hide the fifties' ugliness of this house with my wool.

It must have started with *The Three Lives of Thomasina,* narrated by the cat, with that dream-sequence where the Disney heroine has an after-life experience during her coma and we see her trotting up the golden stairs of Cat Heaven toward the gleaming image of Bast — only to be lifted out of her little premature grave by the witch woman who marries the vet. Happy ending. When I was nine I had cat funerals but without the cat. I was deeply jealous of my friend Leah because she had a Siamese. In all the years after my mother's breakdown (when she broke up with Jack for the fourth time), the only pet I ever had in my mother's apartment was a treefrog named "Freetog," who escaped; we found him years later — a tiny, dusty mummy — under the piano when we moved it, and that was it. No other animals. Certainly not cats that could spray and claw the furniture. Other girls drew profiles of glamorous women in the margins of their classroom notebooks: I drew cats. Panthers. Tigresses. Gods with retractable claws. I was a sphinx in disguise, my tics were the displaced twitchings of my invisible tail.

Mother's gentleman friend Jack was a dog-lover and *he* was allowed to bring over his two horny German shepherds. "Stop it, Jupiter!" Loud whacks directed at me with a newspaper. Mother never told me why Jack thought

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what they were doing to my leg was so funny. All I knew was that dogs were gross. Cats were subtle. That I was a target for male ridicule. Jack's contemptuous "har har." The boys in homeroom: "I bet YOU couldn't kiss her!"

Dennis comes out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his generous middle. He sits down sassily on the couch next to me.

"What do you have planned for today?"

I hate that question even more than "How was it?" It's his urgent need for me to be productive. Normal. More urgent, even, than my being orgastic.

"I don't know," I say, and my hand wants to reach out and swipe something away from the air but I deflect it with an upward thrust of my shoulder.

Dennis is productive. Even if he doesn't fix his glasses. He makes a fortune illustrating science-fiction bookjackets. He has a loft downtown. It's full of his expensive futuristic cityscapes. I hate sci-fi art. He's asked me to live with him so I could save my father's money. I can't think of anything more suffocating.

Mia comes to me and claws at my terry-cloth robe. She climbs up my leg and settles and resettles herself in my lap, vibrating her pleasure. I wheeze affectionately over her, examining her ears, her whiskers, the pink balls of her feet, the web between the normal and abnormal toes, the ingenious sheathing mechanism: you pinch it gently and out pops the needle, like pinching a snapdragon and making it "talk." "This little talon went to market," I gabble. "This little talon stays at home...."

"I wonder what she's thinking about," I say, fatuous new cat owner.

"Cats don't think."

Mia draws her rasped tongue along her paw which she then passes over and over her ear in that lovely nodding motion of her head and I suggest that I shouldn't throw away the fur in her comb. "Maybe I could weave it into my next project," I say, and as if she understands me, Mia cocks her little comic Egyptian face up at me and I bend down to kiss her between her ears.

"Stop that," barks Dennis. "You shouldn't even be holding that beast."

I look at Dennis where he sits at the other end of the sofa: a man with a bandaid on his glasses and a pink towel wrapped around his waist.

"Mia isn't a beast." Mia gets up and stretches.

"Any creature that doesn't cover its asshole is a beast," says Dennis.

"What does that make us, half an hour ago?" I say.

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Dennis reaches for the plant spritzer. "She needs a shot where she forgot to wipe." He aims, and Mia scrambles.

"Cut it out," I yell. "She has feelings."

"That's *rampant* anthropomorphism." Dennis smiles, pleased with himself.

"No it isn't." I retrieve Mia and soothe her. "Somewhere in this universe there's a little cat consciousness, a little self that feels me scratching her ears, that senses your *hostility*...."

Dennis scratches my ear. "You're no good at being philosophical."

He launches into one of his numbing lectures about how cats don't have selves. Or "subjectivity." That's the word he uses. That *nobody* really does except the person who is in a position to speak about it. He has a degree from Berkeley. He tells me about the Turing test and Descartes and the neocortex. He tells me about somebody named "Purse" and how we are only "cognitively available" to each other through language and all this other blotto that I can't refute. Dennis is a cogsci student turned commercial artist; I didn't even finish school. I have to endure his insensitive cat jokes.

"My cat is conscious," is my feeble retort.

Dennis plunks his bare foot down in my lap and suggests that what I was doing to Mia I should really be doing to him. Mia darts out of the room.

"You have to go home now." I dump his heavy foot on the floor.

Dennis goes home. I go to the library on one of my reading binges. I look up consciousness. Descartes. The brain. Abnormalities of the brain. I check out a book on anaesthesia and one on veterinary anaesthesia. I read it obsessively. Especially the chapters on consciousness and pain. I come back home and sit in the bathroom on the edge of the bathtub, listening to the ping ping ping of the radiator — one, two hours at a stretch — and, with a surgeon's cold-blooded precision I give into my tyrannical compulsions and pluck the hairs out of my arms and legs with my fingernails. Where the skin has become shiny and tough, I start on the scabs. I'm powerless to stop removing the irritant.

Tonight I lie down on the carpet next to where Mia is sprawled and looked at the underside of my coffee table. I've begun to draw things from the floor up. Things without names. That's the unimaginable world of the animal. To go hunting for pink rubber bands without naming them, without even naming self, is unimaginable, isn't it? A cat doesn't wonder: why wasn't I born a human? Why do I have a tail and you don't? A cat isn't into useless concepts. How refreshing. I try to imagine what it feels like to purr.

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There's the prickle of whiskers on my face as Mia investigates me and my strange posture and for an instant I smell a faint cologne, like the kind girls used to wear in high school. I stare into her eyes with their winking membranes, that unmistakable feature of a cat's gaze, and hold back my sneeze.

Something, somewhere in the universe, is seeing me.

The Veterinarian

Cat myth: that cats are independent.

Cat mystery: no one knows how a cat purrs.

Cat fact: cats often purr when they're in distress.

Descartes fact: humans are "ensouled" machines. Because animals don't have souls they're just machines. A vestige of this attitude operates today, which is why we have vivisection, cosmetic testing on animals, and ketamine in veterinary surgery.

I take my electrical cat to the vet. I need a carrier: twenty dollars. She must have a rabies shot, a distemper shot, a test for round worms, feline leukemia and a vaccination a week later. A hundred and nineteen dollars total. I introduce Mia to the carrier and she backs away. I feel like I'm thrusting her into an oven. She balks at the opening, moans, her little "MIA" full of betrayal and beseechment; she scratches, she holds her ground, I push her in and she whirls around only to have me slam the gate shut in her face. She turns in circles in her jail, rattling the carrier violently. She starts to pant, a terrible sight in a cat. A terrible sound comes from her, and a smell: rank, sweet. She has gone through this before. A carrier took her to the pound. "Mia," I croon. "Everything's all right."

Everything is not all right. She's trapped in an animal terror that can't be assuaged by words. In the back seat of my car she makes that sound like a peacock all the way to the vet while my shoulder hitches uncontrollably. The vet is very professional. He turns Mia over and over as if she's dough, sticks needles into her and reminds me that I should arrange to get her spayed. Yes of course, I say, stroking my cowering beast who is shedding violently and leaving big sweaty pawprints on the linoleum surface of the examining table. Spayed, I think, and imagine a wedge-shaped gardening tool thrusting into the belly of my cat and scooping out her sex. Spaded, say some people for whom

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the image has overpowered the grammar. We go home, and Mia's obvious relief to see the familiar nameless things of my apartment fills me with gratitude. That night she sleeps under my covers with me, as though I am her savior, having saved her from my other self. She can't visualize the weapon that we're dangling over her. That's when I have my anthropo- or should I say *gyneco*-morphic dream.

The Totem

Since childhood I've had variations on this dream. I'm put in charge of some little creature that is recognizable at the beginning of the dream as a kitten, or a puppy or a rabbit, and it becomes a piece of string that I lose or step on, or a blade of grass that I drop in the hedge. I hunt feverishly and when at last I find it, it rebukes me for my inattention but it is no longer an animal. I don't know what it is. A human totem of an animal. In fairy tales you have the animal totem of a human. Not here.

In my dream Mia turns into a white moth which I've accidentally added to my terrarium full of toads. Weeping hysterically (I always weep in these dreams), I shrink myself and search the tank until I find Mia's empty dress. That's when she speaks to me. She's sitting next to the terrarium which is in my old bedroom at home. Freetog is mummified, but Mia is alive.

There she is: Mia and not Mia — a girl of twelve or thirteen. She looks like my old school friend Leah: freckled, with fluffy dark hair; gray-green eyes and dark lashes; short upturned nose; childish little chin, serious mouth. She's wearing a furry, close-fitting dress, one that I'd made her. Her feet are bare. She's painted her long nails pink like the fingers of the models the other schoolgirls always draw. She's thin and small and her eyelids are lined with kohl. She bobs her head at me. I'm confused in my dream; I don't think I've registered that she's not a cat.

"I don't like being put in a cage," she says.

"I'm sorry, Mia, but what could I do?"

I launch into an embarrassingly mawkish lecture of "why-it-is-I-can't-explain-my-actions-to-a-cat" and how I'm going to make her into a purse. When I wake up, the girl is a beast again, her little purring spine pressed into the small of my back. My throat is sore from dream-crying and allergies.

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The Girl

How much easier it would be to give Mia a pill if she could understand my explanations. None of this wrestling around on the kitchen floor where she makes me feel as though I'm forcing some sadistic and arbitrary punishment on her. "Do you want to have parasites?" I tell her while I clamp her jaws shut with one hand and stroke her resistant, nauseated throat with the other. What does she know about parasites? All she knows is that I'm doing something bad to her. In our struggles she bites her lip and blood oozes out of the corner of her mouth and over her little speckled chin. I wince.

"You know who you look like?" I say in a feeble attempt at placation while Mia swipes disgustedly at her face.

There was a girl who used to tell me secrets in the library when we were supposed to be writing our term papers on the Aztecs. I would always write them down in my diary. In the ninth grade she told me how she was invited to a party by this gorgeous college graduate and her mother wouldn't let her go but she snuck out anyway in her miniskirt and poorboy sweater and rode her bicycle to the house across town where he lived but when she got there she was the only one there. You got here early, he said. I thought you said the party started at eight, she said. No, I said nine, he said, but that's okay. Do you want some hot chocolate while we wait for the others? Sure, she said; she told me he seemed especially grown up in knowing that she couldn't legally drink alcohol, and she sat in the living room and waited for him to make it and bring it out from the kitchen. She drank the hot chocolate while he leaned against the door and asked her about her college plans and that sort of thing, very polite — he was very cute, very sophisticated, at least twenty-five — when things got vague. He was poking the back of her hand with a pin and the next thing she knew she was collapsed on the couch with ten-ton weights on her arms and legs. She wanted to say "I've fainted," but she couldn't even open her eyes, let alone her mouth, and the world became rubbery and heavy and pressed down on her and choked her like spit. Her date, meanwhile, took off her poorboy shirt and her miniskirt and her underwear and her skin and her muscles and veins and bones and tried to do what she'd heard reports of in gym class except that from where she was looking down, as she floated around in the air above, it seemed as though he were a priest bent over her lifeless, flower-bestrewn body, praying and praying

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and church music was playing. And then he was stitching her up again except for her heart which he sacrificed to the other Aztec priests and it wasn't a dream. You were awake the whole time? Yes, she said, and swore me to secrecy. I think I must've gotten a little dizzy, she said when she could move. He asked her if she was all right. Yeah, I'll be fine. Do you need a ride? No, she had her bike, but he was not convinced that she'd be "safe," as he put it, and with a great show of gallantry and anxiety he tied her bike down in the trunk of his car and drove her home, and it was hours and hours later. She said "thank you," got out, threw up, and never told her mother what had happened. You never even said anything to him? No. Not even you bastard? I whispered fiercely. No. Why not? I don't know, said Leah.

When I told reconstructions of this story to my other friends, I always changed Leah's name so that I wouldn't be violating her confidence. I never wrote this incident down in my diary.

The wind is in the south bringing its thawing rains. Water drips off the eaves outside. The vet's assistant calls up, interrupting my ritual gestures at the loom that Mia finds so fascinating and my tics find so restful.

"Bring her in," he says. "She'll be going into heat any day now."

"What are the consequences?"

"A cat in heat cannot be contained. She WILL have kittens..."

"I know. Four times as much dander floating around in the air."

Call-waiting. It's my mother. She wants me to come see her in Boston.

"I can't, Mother. I'd have to get a cat -sitter."

"Why can't Dennis do it?"

"He's too busy."

"Why don't you just kennel her?"

"I can't, she has a thing about being confined."

"Isn't that a little anthropomorphic?"

I call the vet himself.

"Will you be using ketamine on my cat to anaesthetize her?"

"That and other things. We...."

"I read that ketamine isn't a real anaesthetic."

"It's a dissociative anaesthetic."

"Is it humane?"

The vet chuckles. "Of course it is. As I was saying...."

"Then why don't we use it on humans?"

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"Will you let me finish my sentence? Ketamine has been known to produce temporary psychotic episodes in some people. In *some* people."

"But not in animals."

"No."

"Being a telepath, you're sure of that?" I say and the vet hangs up.

Dennis says: "You antagonize people."

I tell him I don't want Mia to suffer and he asks me why don't I show the same concern for humans.

"Because humans stick detergents in rabbits' eyes. Humans make bombs."

"Look." Dennis puts his hands on my shoulder in a really unbearable condescension. "There are some things you just can't think about too carefully."

I tell Dennis I have to go home and feed my cat at five. He tells me it won't make that much difference if I feed her later. He tries to kiss me.

"She might run out of water," I say, yanking my face away from his.

"She won't."

"I might have left the burner on."

"You didn't leave the burner on."

"I have to go back."

Dennis throws his hands up in the air.

I gather my wool around me and slip out to the wet car. Stirring up the exposed and rotting leaves of the March thaw I drive the country roads, roar into my apartment parking lot, trot up the outside stairs and push through my front door, keys jangling. "Mia?" I call. I check the burner. Not on. I check Mia's water. Filled to the brim. I check the iron. Put away. I check the slip cover over the loom. Cat proof. I check the heater in the bedroom. Not on. Not on, not burning.

I check myself in the bathroom mirror. Not ugly; Dennis isn't quite so desperate although he thinks I am. Poised behind me in the doorway to the lighted hall is the purple silhouette of a girl, her pointed fingers spread out as if to beckon or ward me off. My own startled hand strikes the ceramic tile with a crack and she leaps away out of view. Slowly, I turn, like one of those tottering marionettes in a jewelry box.

A cat is crouched in the hallway, two phosphorescent lenses like planets.

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The Philosopher Again

It's my dogatonic three hours in the bathroom and I sit hunched in the corner running my hand over my forearm, sniffing out the telltale stubble. I'm thinking hard about consciousness.

It has something to do with the "reticular formation," which is somehow responsible for the way in which our brains interpret external sensation. General anaesthesia that is considered acceptable to use on human persons *must* suppress this reticular formation. Its role in what we call "consciousness" is not exactly known. Neither d-tubocurarine, pavulon, succinylcholine nor ketamine are reticular formation suppressants, though they'll knock you out.

Mia is perched on the edge of the empty bathtub; her right foot bobs restlessly back and forth — along with her entire slender leg where it is crossed over the other. She twists around suddenly and bends backward into the bathtub, running her hands over the glossy porcelain. I've gotten used to those hands, with their extra little fingers. With a neat flip all of her is in the tub, now, and she follows the drip drip drip of the faucet with identical movements of her head. Cupping the water in her hands she smooths it over her freckled face. She makes a very strange girl.

Atrocious errors were committed in the course of surgical experimentation with d-tubocurarine. How did surgeons discover its horrible effects? The drug which South American Indians used to tip their arrows with looked to those who trusted their senses like a general anaesthetic. The animal was down, unmoving, its neuro-vegetative system depressed, and it didn't respond to the most vigorous stimuli. Obviously, it was UNCONSCIOUS. In the forties, curare was substituted in surgeries for ether because of the superior post-operative recoveries made by patients — with one drawback: they accused the surgeon of torturing them. As most of these patients were small children, however, and not in full control of language, their plaints were ignored. To be aware of every scalding slice of the scalpel, every piercing suture and unable to protest, unable even to lift the corner of your lip — it took an adult to confirm the terrifying consciousness of children under curare.

Ketamine goes straight for the psyche: its use in human patients became questionable when so many of them reported hideous hallucinogenic distortions of what was happening to them. Without a neocortex, a cat doesn't hallucinate — especially if it's immobile and not exhibiting a subjective experience. Hell is for humans.

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Mia scrambles out of the bathtub and over to me. She kneels down where I'm crouched and catches my inexorable and destructive hand. I look into her earnest green eyes. She wants me to stroke her hair. I stop what I'm doing and stroke her hair. I stop what I'm doing. That's the amazing thing.

The Totem Again

I'm getting used to coming home and finding Mia in her girl-form. She doesn't take shape dramatically. It isn't anything you can *see*. You close your eyes and open them and she's there as gynecomorph. You come in the door and a child throws her skinny arms around you and presents her little heart-shaped freckled face up to yours to be kissed. Then she struts away, back arched in mock aggression, all twelve strange fingers spread. She wears a fuzzy little dress of wool and cat fur that I wove for her. The other night she sat hunched in a corner of the couch, grasping her knees. Only her slow blink cued me that she wasn't human. For obvious reasons, I can't feed her out of a dish on the floor when she is in this state, and with gritting patience I have been teaching Mia the Girl how to eat with a fork.

Pointy elbows on the table, Mia dangles the fork over her tuna plate, and drops it with a clang. She grips a greasy wad of salad between long-nailed thumb and forefinger and shoves it in her mouth. "No, Mia," I snap. I pick up the fork, load it with tuna and tuck it into her mouth.

"Don't you think it's a little weird," says Dennis, who happens to be dining with us, "to feed your cat at the table?"

"Mia is exceptional."

"Don't get me wrong, your cat is nice. But I still think it's weird to feed it at the table with a fork. Not to mention nauseating."

"Then go."

"Just get the cat off the table."

Mia, meanwhile, is licking my lettuce, elbows angled up on either side of her head. Dennis reaches out a heavy hand and smacks her in the face, and she leaps back, eyes fluttering in confusing.

I smack Dennis.

"You're crazy," he says.

"Hack!" says Mia, her first human word.

"That's right!" I cry. "Nothing BUT a hack! Hack!"

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"Crazy bitch!"

Dennis lumbers out, like some big naked bear under ill-fitting clothes. I hear the door slam and the whole cardboard apartment shudders.

I don't see him for a week. He leaves messages on my machine; whenever I'm reminded of some nice thing he's done for me I try to think of his cat jokes. Mia as "koosh-ball." I have to work at it. I tell myself he reminds me of Jack.

I have to work at Mia, too. As soon as I start to think that Mia, as beautiful as she is in human form, does not purr, does not have retractable claws, does not really give me the same protective signals that she does as an animal even when she's curled up in bed with me, her thin girlish ribs warm and calm under my defective arm, then the miracle dissolves and — boof! she's merely a little cat, like so many other common housecats under the bedspread, and soon I'm back in the bathroom twitching and picking my arms and legs raw.

Seven months and no sign of heat. I try not to think about that as well.

The Doctor Again

THE ALLERGIST has turned the tender skin of my forearm into a gridwork of bumps with her sharp little instrument and her various bottles of irritants. "And this is cat dander," she says maliciously, indicating a welt the size of a dime. "Four plus.

"I noticed the scabs on the backs of your arms," she observes. "Have you been to a dermatologist about these?"

An all around ordeal, going to the allergist. Meanwhile, I've developed conjunctivitis and it's back to the primary care physician who peers into my reddened eye. "You still got the cat?" he mutters.

"Yes, I've still got the fucking cat. When are you gonna stop asking me that?"

"I'm sending you to an ophthalmologist...."

I go to the eye-doctor who tells me I have a mild corneal abrasion and gives me vasocidin which I'm to drop into my eyes every four hours. Dennis isn't talking to me and Mia is putting my dangling earrings in her ears.

I come home with yellow dye on my eyelids and Mia greets me by throwing herself at my feet and rolling, rolling, rolling. She arches her neck and undulates along the rug. Her hands reach out and stroke my shoes.

"Get up. Don't do that."

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"Heaven," says Mia. Her eyes are heavily lined, and she's been into my lipstick as well. She scrambles to her feet and whirls around the living room, one gypsy earring swinging luxuriously under her short black hair. Her dress is different. It's my old purple leather disco skirt.

"What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" I moan.

Mia darts to the window and presses herself against the glass. "Heaven," she says again, rubbing her pubis voluptuously against the sill. Dennis is walking resolutely up the outside stairs.

I intercept him, pulling the apartment door shut behind me. Mia looks through the window, a pale freckled girl face. Dennis can't see that she isn't a cat.

"What do you want?"

"I want my electric shaver."

"I'll mail it to you.'

"I think we ought to talk about this," he says, moving toward the door. I block his path. "Aren't you letting things get a little out of hand? Why can't we just talk?"

"Not inside my house."

"Let me out! Let me out!" cries Mia, her breasts pressed against the glass.

"If you want to shut me out of your life, then fine, but I have a RIGHT to MY THINGS!" shouts Dennis.

"Chill out, Dennis. I'll get the shaver for you."

I go inside; Mia makes a dash for the door but I grab her arm and shove her into the bedroom.

"Listen here," I say as she writhes under my grip. "You cut that out now."

"Ow, owww!" Mia complains. She wants to get her hands under her skirt.

Dennis is pounding on the door.

"Just a goddamn minute!" I scream, and drag Mia into the wardrobe and close and lock it with its little Victorian key. She makes a horrendous noise, muffled and clanking.

I ransack the bathroom and gather up Dennis's toothbrush and shaver.

"Here you are," I say at the door and fling them at him.

"Let's be..."

"No!"

"Jesus Christ! It's just a CAT! I don't BELIEVE this..."

I slam the door and chain lock it.

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Shaking, I collapse on the couch. There is a scratching in the bedroom. Still shaking, I turn the key and free Mia from her prison, a demure and grateful tabby in heat. She drapes my ankles with her purrs.

The Cat

I have to go to Boston. Mother's had a stroke.

I'm in a swivet. Mother's all right; she's in the hospital; she'll survive. She needs me. What do I do about Mia? Her first estrus has passed, but the next one is unpredictable.

"Leave her," says the pet shop attendant. "A cat can stay alone for a week if you buy one of those water and food dispensers."

I'm thinking: she can't be Mia the Girl if I'm not there, can she? And if she's a cat all week, who will change her litterbox?

I can't have Dennis look after her. Dennis and I aren't speaking.

I call Dennis. "I'm sorry," I say. I tell him my mother is seriously ill and I'm frantic to find someone to keep an eye on Mia.

Reluctantly, he agrees.

He enrages me by taking my careful list of cat tasks taped to the refrigerator and crumpling it up in his hand. "She's a cat," he says. "I'll feed her every day but I'm not going to set the table for her."

"Just make sure she doesn't go out. She's going in and out of heat. Make sure you lock the deadbolt with the key when you leave."

"You've taught her how to open the door?" sneers Dennis.

I hate him, but what can I do?

I get on a jet plane. As the wheels leave the ground I'm clawing at the air uncontrollably and pulling at the scabs on my arms. I should never have let Dennis take care of Mia. I start hyperventilating.

"We've begun our descent into the Boston Metropolitan Area. Please bring your seats to their upright position and make sure that your seatbelt is securely fastened."

I'm crying about my mother now. Six miles above the earth and I can begin to put some things in perspective. A stroke. The doctors weren't specific: would I find her unable to speak? Unable to move? Would her left or her right side be paralyzed?

I dodge the nurses in the hospital corridors.

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My mother says: "I'm so glad you're here."

She can speak. She can even move both hands. She's in a hospital bed looking like her old self.

"It's good to be here, Mother."

"I wish it were good. Nothing is good anymore."

"That's not true, Mother."

"I thought you might not come, because of that damned cat," she says with effort.

"Forget the cat, mother. She's being taken care of."

"I need to have a brush with death before you'll visit me anymore. Is that the way it goes?"

"Hush, Mother. I'm here."

"You always were a wretched girl," she whispers. "You never did anything to please me. It's been a burden to raise you and you're still a burden."

I'm used to her seizures of meanness.

"Are they taking care of you, Mother?"

"They're all incompetent. I need you to fix me my food the way I like it. And I need my chintz dressing gown. I'm freezing here."

Mother gives me a long list of items needed from her apartment.

In the taxi, resentment begins to set in. The cabdriver draws up to the old block of brownstones. As I ride up the elevator with its familiar rattle resentment gives way to despair and I have a vivid image of myself playing nurse to my invalid mother for the rest of my life. The stroke wasn't bad. The doctor said that she would just need a little help getting around.

The place hasn't changed. The big overstuffed chairs, the funeral parlor curtains, the thick Indian rugs, the jade Buddha in the alcove over the bookshelves. The black telephone on the polished cherry telephone stand. I could just leave. I could call a taxi and go to the airport. Now.

Impossible. I can't leave my ailing mother three hours after I arrived. Guilt has me twisting in its intractable claws. I take the stuff to Mother and go home again by taxi and spend the night in my old sterile bed without once sneezing and I can't stop thinking about little Mia — waiting at the window for my car, waiting to come greet me at the door at the first rattle of my keys in the lock. She'll wait and wait and only Dennis will come. Or won't come. Only Dennis will slop her water bowl down on the floor for her, dump her food in her plate without even washing off the dried rotting flakes of her previous

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meal. Or won't. Maybe Dennis won't feed her at all. He would forget. Or get called out of town and ask a friend to feed her and *he'd* forget. And Mia, trapped in her discounted subjectivity, would watch the empty shadows of the apartment and wait. I might be run over by a taxi. Or knifed and hospitalized. Or killed in a plane crash. And Mia, waiting, wastes away from wanting and meowing. Not even the neighbors will hear her and weeks later they'll find her maggoty corpse in the bathtub where she could no longer lick at the porcelain. I'm tormented by this image for two days while my mother gets heartier and more vindictive by the minute. She'll need a companion to help her with her meals, says the nurse, and to get her used to the walker. At least for the first few weeks.

"Why did you ever go off your medication?" my mother demands as my left arm and side do a Saint Vitus dance.

"Don't you think there's just too much medication these days, Mother?"

"I spent thousands of dollars on you. And you're worse than you were."

"Do you want Earl Gray or Constant Comment?" I ask, holding up the colorful boxes and jigging them back and forth.

"Oh, get some control," says my mother.

I take a bus out to Mount Auburn Cemetery and look at the grave of Dr. William T.G. Morton who invented anaesthesia and "Since Whom Science Has Control of Pain." Written on his tombstone. Tucked between my starchy sheets, I dream that I'm on all fours searching the apartment for a rubber band that refuses to become a cat.

I wake up early Saturday morning in the mausoleum; I pick up the black phone on the cherry table and dial Dennis's number. It's busy. I try several times. Busy. Busy. The phone rings. "Hello?" I cry hopefully. Jack answers me. His voice is unmistakable.

"And who could this be?" it asks coquettishly. "Another of Lily's ravishing helpers?"

I pause. Jack's falsity was never lost on me.

"What do you want, Jack?"

"Don't tell me this is Leda! Why...we must SIMPLY get together again. Pronto! What brings you to our fair city?"

"As if you didn't know."

"I know how important it is for you to spend quality time with your cat, so it was really six of one and half a dozen of the other as to whether you'd come down or not for your old lady."

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It's like the walls are caving in on me.

"You never HAVE told me what you've been up to, you wayward girl. Are you still living upstate?" Over the phone I can hear a sharp yelp.

"How's the pharmacy, Jack?" I ask.

"Splendid. Do you need any medications? I can get them for you half price."

"No thanks."

"Your mother won't even tell me what city you live in," Jack is saying.

If I had hair on my arms it would be standing straight out.

"Anubis," I say and the breath hisses out of my teeth.

"Never heard of it. You got a boyfriend, Leda? By the way, I have a couple of new pups that would charm you silly."

And I can tell that Boston will finish me. I'll slip into a crevice where none of my fabrications will save me. Paralyzed by convention, the Goddess cannot withstand the Jackal.

He continues: "You must have heard about the ice storm? They had a dreadful ice storm in Rochester last night. Power is shut off for about thirty thousand people. Is that where you live?"

"No," I lie.

"That's good. Well, I look forward to seeing you again. I'm sure I will. You *do* know that your mother and I are on quite good terms."

"When aren't you?"

"What time shall I drop by?"

I take a deep breath. "Do you have keys to the apartment, Jack?"

"Sure do."

"Mother won't be coming back for a couple of days. Why don't you let yourself in, say, around one o'clock tomorrow. Get there ahead of me. I'd be interested in talking to you about certain drugs." Let him hear my voice shake. "Like ketamine for instance."

"Is that a prescription drug?"

"One o'clock. The apartment. Just you and me. Auld lang syne."

"I'll be there, Leda." The familiar predatory undertone.

"Good." I hang up. I call Dennis's number. It's still busy. I call my own number. It's busy, too. The phone lines are dead. Mia is crouching in the darkness, wringing her strange little hands.

I call the hospital. "Would you please tell my mother that I've had an emergency and have to fly home? I've arranged for a nurse to be on hand for

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her when she comes home tomorrow at two. I'll drop by with the cab fare." I hang up before I'm told anything new.

Breathless, I call the airport. All planes to Rochester are tied up because of the weather. I put twenty dollars in an envelope for my mother's cabfare, shove it in the receptionist's hands and fly out of the hospital. "I'll call," I shout over my shoulder. A cab costs me thirty dollars. I wait for twelve hours at the airport, jigging and grimacing.

Mia. My little Mia. Please don't hate me for leaving you. I'm coming home, I'll take care of you, I love you.

I read the newspapers. Ice storm in the Rochester area. Winds from the Northeast brought a sudden drop in temperature after warm torrential rains and everything grew a heavy coat of ice. Car windows smashed in by fallen branches. Massive damage to trees and property. No heat or electricity for thousands. Fourteen hospitalized. Jack wasn't lying.

I fly standby at quarter after midnight. Thank God for my mother's credit card. We coast over moonlit, glacial terrain.

The outskirts of Rochester are transfigured. Everything is white, but not with snow. Whole sections of town are black and unrecognizable. The trees have put on a strange spring foliage: they are festooned with angel hair, glittering tresses of glass that trace haloes around the functioning streetlights. Drops are frozen in rows along the powerlines like necklaces of teeth. Heavy with this unnatural fruit, limbs have torn away from trunks and the roads are choked with severed branches, live wires and hollow tubes of ice. It's breathtakingly beautiful. "I don't know if we can get through to your neck of the woods," the taxi driver is telling me. I hear explosions in the forest, as yet another crystal chandelier shatters to the ground. The trees are shedding their unbearable clothes.

"Keep the change," I tell the taxi driver. "This is close enough."

I gallop across the frozen Upland Meadow.

As I gallop, I notice the tomcats. They're everywhere. Loping and mewing and moaning and dashing into thickets. Big ones, stripy ones, black and white ones, bold, furtive, arrogant, laid-back ones, all of them with their big saucy balls. What are all these cats doing around here, I wonder.

The lights are on in the parking lot of my apartment building. It's one fifty-five a.m. I see a couple of unfamiliar cars next to mine, one of them a bright red thunderbird. There's a tomcat under the back left tire. He scuttles

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away. I dash up the outside stairs and burst in to find two guys in sleeping bags in my living room and Dennis in my bed.

"Hi," says Dennis groggily, squinting and groping for his glasses in the light I've flicked on. "Your place had heat and electricity..."

"Where's Mia?" I can feel my nose wrinkling, my lips peeling back.

"Don't get all bent out of shape, but she went into heat again and..."

"Did you let her out?"

"There were three of us here coming and going..."

"YOU LET HER OUT! WHEN?!"

He can't restrain me. It's really quite ridiculous, this flabby man in his underwear trying to hold my arms. He's telling me that I can't go out to look for her, that it's dangerous out there. "Bullshit!" I keep hissing. He's powerless to keep my hands down. They come up and snatch at the air in front of his face and he's flung back. I've drawn blood. My hands snatch at my coat. I'm becoming unraveled. Dennis is shouting and chasing after me into the living room as I unravel my arms; he's shouting at the shocked, vulnerable men, naked as jays in their sleeping bags, to help him restrain me. I'm ripping my dress off and shrieking, "Bastard! BASSSSSSSST!" and tearing at my skin. Dennis has his back to the door. But the Goddess helps her priestess. She sneezes and I crash through the window.

It is effortless. Really. The window shatters like a thousand exploding lightbulbs and I'm teetering on the outdoor railing. From there I fling myself one storey down in an exhilarating, twisting plunge to the ground where I land on my feet. My shoulders pop into proper parallel alignment with each other and with one well-placed swipe of my nails I rip out of the rest of my skin; I spit and it falls away from me, withered, pathetic and threadbare. I'm rid of the irritant. Shedding glass like water and strewing my allergies and tics and other defects behind me in the parking lot I head for the woods of glittering angel hair, wearing my real coat.

"Mia! MIAA!" I keen, following the line of her scent as bright as a color in my nostrils.

The human things are blithering after me but they mean nothing to me. Wordless specks on my retinas. All that matters is this electrical integrity: the sensual coordination of desire and body.

And the galloping rhythm of the earth leaps up joyfully to touch all four of my swift and perfect hands.

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Robert Onopa's most recent appearance in F&SF *inspired our February 1992 cover. His story in this issue is also a cover story. Kent Bash did the painting, based on Bob's vision.*

Bob lives on the Windward side of Oahu. He writes that an aberrant morning schedule put him in the commute that led to "Traffic."

Traffic

By Robert Onopa

"He must go by another way who would escape
this wilderness, for that mad beast that fleers
before you there, suffers no man to pass.
She tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut,
but, feeding, she grows hungrier than she was."
Inferno I

WHAT FOLLOWS, LIKE A snaking line of cars, is the story of the first time I ever set foot inside a Nomad vehicle. It was one of those days: traffic was a bitch. I was late for my analyst's, and the usual ground-level routes through Studio City were tangled by buses and vans. The sidewalks along Moorpark were either stacked with illegal parking or in use as right turn lanes. I was creeping along in my Saturn, an old electric bomb, behind a silver Benz, a replica diesel; the Benz belched black smoke so dense I didn't notice the gridlock at Coldwater until I was part of it. I backed through an alley only to find my path

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obstructed by an articulated trash hauler so huge, so sinister, I thought of Dante at the beginning of the *Commedia*, his way blocked by the she-wolf of appetite. And then, approaching the gridlock at Coldwater again via the drive-through lane of the Marcos Whiplash Clinic, I saw in the fluorescent blue haze blanketing the intersection a vision from Hell itself: out of the sea of traffic a red intake port began to surface, snout-like, lupine. The glistening black pickup on whose hood it was mounted was customized with enormous soft tires twice the height of a man. Sounding an airhorn, it surged forward mightily, first bumping the Lexus ahead, then climbing the slope of its trunk and the Hyundai's in the next lane, cresting over both cabins, bumping, gyrating, crushing its way forward.

Then it turned in my direction.

Only in L.A, I told myself, *could it come to this.*

So I swung through the telltale camp of shabby cardboard huts, the Nomad camp everybody was pretending not to see. I blew my horn, scattering two poor Nomad families in their earth-colored rags, then punched through to one of the abandoned ramps of what used to be called the Ventura Freeway. I was trying, as you may have guessed, to bypass the Coldwater mess by getting on a Nomad Interface, a section of urban roadway Nomads are permitted to cruise when they drop down off the Interstate, what they call The Way.

Usually Residents like me, even Residents like the madman in the truck, avoid the Nomad Interface. I had a pirated ambulance chip mounted on my firewall to get me through even undocumented barriers like this one — without the chip, of course, you fry. At the end of the trash-strewn lane of crumbling concrete I felt my old Saturn vibrate through the electronic membrane; I merged onto the Ventura as if I belonged there.

On the Interface the right lanes were thick with Nomad load-carriers uncoupling on the fly. If the drivers ever stop, as everyone knows, they forfeit their rigs and wind up in cardboard shacks like those I'd driven through. Transfer cabs licensed to switch the loads to and from the city zipped around the middle lanes like house lizards in a world of brontosaurial thirty-two and sixty-four wheelers. I finally got up to speed on the viaduct over Sepulveda Boulevard.

That's when my Saturn — with a sickening *whump and sizzle* from the front end — lost power.

I coasted onto the shoulder and made some calls on my celphone. Under the hood I found my SunStar system and batteries fused into a blackened blob

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of polycarbon and ceramics. I couldn't even find the socket for my chip.

Then the sirens went off, the ones in the membrane, the ones that announce the daily clearing of all Nomad vehicles from the Interface: *a fine time for this,* I remember thinking; you need a chip even to *walk* off.

That's when I saw the Nomad rig, a white forty footer, creeping my way on the shoulder. A boy wearing an EARTHQUAKE|08 cap was leaning out, his hand on the door handle as the rig loomed toward me. "Hey, mister," the kid yelled — I could see an old guy driving, his white hair long in the Nomad way — "You wanna upload?"

The sirens were wailing. Back a klick down at the foot of the viaduct Jurassic earth-moving equipment was already clearing the stragglers.

I'd never been so close to a Nomad vehicle before. I put my driving shoe on the brass footplate, grabbed the carved handhold, and swung through the open door.

The cab I tumbled into was dim with muted colors. My new silver suit, trendy in L.A., made me feel immediately self-conscious. I took a deep breath and almost gagged: organic fabrics, leather, grease, food, fossil fuels and...what else? Was it true that Nomads never bathed?

"Hey," the old guy yelled above the high frequency wail. "You understand? We're headed up the ramp."

Now the hair rose on the back of my neck. As the old guy'd said, the big I-5 ramp, the ramp out of L.A., loomed in the tinted windshield. The Nomad swarm of vehicles funneled its way, glimmering under their diesel stacks and solar arrays. In the dusty red light a few illegal peds dodged police APC's, running for the shoulder, scattering along the membrane like it was the southern border, getting jolted: *ash in a flash,* as they say on the street. I started a quick inventory of my life but never got past the problems I was going to talk to my analyst about: tension at the architectural firm where I work, and my rocky engagement to Denise, a woman obsessed with parking spaces. Maybe what I needed was a short adventure.

"Boy, is my mom gonna flame when she finds out we loaded a porker," the kid said. "I mean a *parker.* Sorry."

"I fused my chip," I told the old guy. "I don't know what to do."

"Then ride with us, stranger. There're places we can get you back across. There's Hubbard's Cave in Chicago."

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"Chicago?"

We approached the abandoned toll booths. They marked a kind of border: to the east lay the Interstate, true Nomad territory, disappearing into land darkening as with a change of weather.

Looking into the vast black heart of it, I swooned.

WHEN I woke the next morning, I found myself in a bunk aft in the vehicle, a small patch of UV glass beside me, the creosote scrub of Nevada stretching to the horizon. The truth was, it was sublime. A range of mountains stood clearly in the distance, purple and clean. The electronic fence that kept the Nomads on the road and off the land was barely visible as a series of thin towers. Horrible though my dislocation was, I could see what the Nomads liked about their way of life: the space, the steady movement, the low-level atmosphere you could see right through.

And out there, well, traffic wasn't that bad. The big rigs — the stupendously oversize vans, the doublewide trailers, the canvas-flapping Omars, the sedans, the commercial flatbeds — all moved like a herd of animals, in an orderly, coordinated way, our speed about as fast as a person can run.

Up forward, a graceful woman in her late twenties was driving. She wore the big Nomad earrings, the oversize tunic and chaps, the muted colors. She turned out to be the boy's mother, Acura. I felt self-conscious about my silver suit again; when the light hit the fabric the right way, it actually reflected its surroundings.

I eased myself into the passenger's seat with an ingratiating smile. Acura was attractive, even smelled good, spicy and floral at the same time.

I suppose I was a little intoxicated by her. Or disoriented by the experience of continuous motion. "Isn't it maddening not to stop?" I blurted out, trying to be friendly. "I've always felt you people had a right..."

Her ice-blue eyes narrowed. *"You people?"*

"I'm sorry. I mean, um, you...folk."

"Us folk? Just *where* are *us folk* supposed to demand our rights?" she asked, her lips tight. "Just *where?"*

She was technically correct about the Nomad human rights problem.

Nomad life first began when the refinement of low-v solar rigs coincided with a movement among long-haul truckers to stay on the road all the time; in the cities, mobile offices had already hit the road in the shape of customized

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supervans, "transient architectural mechanisms," wrote *Newsweek*, spawned by roads so choked that cities like L.A. or Bangkok took days to cross. During the housing crisis of '07, commuters with long drives and low budgets abandoned their mortgages and started living full-time in enhanced RVs, joining the thousands of Sioux and Arapaho on the Interstate who'd gone on trek in Winnebagos. The traffic, as they say, merged. Intermarried. When children were born on the road, Nomad Nation became history.

The downside was that native born, "indigenous" Nomads had no legal residence. Their disenfranchisement remained starkly visible: if Nomads got past the membrane, they were relegated to cardboard shacks on deserted freeway ramps. They joined those who'd stopped, the lot of them illegal immigrants unable to qualify even for survival welfare.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just..."

"You're just lucky I was sleeping when they saw you."

"I *was* in trouble."

"I would never have let them pick you up," she said, a vein throbbing on her forehead. "What were you doing out there, anyway? Taking a *short cut*? You parasite."

"The sirens went off," I said sullenly. True, the problems I'd been driving to discuss with my analyst, particularly the problems at work, seemed trivial now. "They would have just scraped me into the Interface."

"All Ryder could talk about this morning was how we had a porker on board."

"The kid? His name's Ryder?"

"*You just leave him alone.*"

Her anger made me ashamed. *These nice people could wind up living on an off-ramp.* "I'll get out of your way as soon as I can," I said.

She turned to me as if to say something, but my suit had gone reflective and she started looking at me as if I was some idiot who'd become partially transparent. I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Hubbard's Cave," the old man, Mack, said. I could see Ryder behind him, rubbing his eyes.

Alongside us Nomad traffic moved as relentlessly as a big ocean swell.

All the Resident newsmedia — CNN, VNN, ABC — paint a picture of the Nomads as gypsy truckers, as transients with cattle trailers, as assorted other road trash. But I saw a different world out there on the Twenty Lane Trail.

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To begin with, at the heart of the swarm aren't transport herds but fleets of caravans driving clustered around mobile shops and services to make up moving communities. I saw curtains in windows, kitchen gardens under sliding skylights. Around noon we passed Nomads eating in a self-propelled restaurant, retro-styled as a railroad dining car, its power panels hidden in the silver of its roof. A long doublewide functioned as a repair center; your rig was raised into it like a dry dock. One supervan tuned out to be a veterinary clinic (one out of every four Nomads towed animals). All the facilities were compact, and I'd guess you'd have to say, primitive, but there was a beauty to them, to the funky efficiency of wood and mylar docking ports.

That day I stuck to my compartment, ate lunch alone, staring out the window, eventually watching the light fade over the traffic and Utah. Ryder came by and invited me to dinner with him and his Grandad at a Nomad "Campfire" — we'd have to step over to a moving flatbed. Mack was behind him, said it was okay, a place kids went to hang out, that I should see more of Nomad life.

I got up and stretched. "I'd love to," I said.

"You can't go like that," Ryder said, waving his hand at my shiny clothes.

"This is all I have."

Mack studied me for a long moment. "We've got some men's clothes in the back," he said.

He did indeed: from a locker beyond the galley he pulled oversize Japanese trousers, an organic fiber shirt, and a soft jacket, a nice one, of burgundy leather.

I saw the woman, Acura, briefly just as Mack docked, the moment before Ryder and I stepped over. I'd been obsessed with her ice-blue eyes all day, her sharp intelligence. Now her wavy brunette hair was loose around her shoulders. I thought she might smile with some sort of approval when she saw the earth-tones of my borrowed clothes. But she only seemed startled when she saw me. Then she wouldn't meet my eyes.

The encounter left me slightly shaken for reasons I couldn't explain. I crossed nervously to a huge flatbed at the center of which burned an artificial fire of used railroad ties. There was a crowd, which took some getting used to — lots of teens, some of them couples, some of them chaperoned by their parents, older people, babies in cloth carriers, a Sioux chief in full regalia, a group of musicians. Dinner was a blur of wholesome simple food on non-slip

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plates; afterward there was singing, long simple chords and the warble of women's voices. The company confirmed for me a sense that all of life was here on the road.

Acura's eyes had a bruised quality, as if she'd been crying, when I joined her up front after we'd reboarded. I couldn't think of anything to say. Then Mack stepped up to spell her at the wheel just as I was slipping off the burgundy jacket.

In a flash I realized whose clothes I'd been wearing: the jacket in my hands was much too big for Mack. The trousers, the coat, the shirt: they belonged to Acura's husband.

As tactfully as I could, I asked about him.

"Why don't you tell us?" Acura said bitterly. "Tell us about *Kill a Nomad Day*. Tell us about hospitals that have to keep moving. Tell us about living in cardboard teepees." She pushed past me and disappeared into the back of the rig.

Mack looked at me after he adjusted the rear view mirrors. He nodded for me to stay in the passenger's seat.

"He was shot by Residents?" I asked Mack.

He shook his head. "Wasn't that. We had to leave him at the Mayo Exit, up on the I-94 in Minnesota. They sometimes help our kind—but they didn't help Chevy." His son-in-law, he explained, had died of kidney problems well beyond the capabilities of Nomad clinics; Chevy's entry into a Resident medical center had been denied. The chance for help had meant abandoning him, but the help had not come.

Now I felt stupid again, really stupid. "It was very generous of you to let me board," I said.

The next day I kept out of Acura's way, out of respect. I played checkers with Ryder and watched the landscape of Wyoming slide by a streaked side window as if the white light mountains themselves were on the move. Then came the interminable rolling plains of Nebraska and Iowa.

We crossed the Mississippi, gliding over a silver arch, and entered Illinois.

I'd put myself in the front seat beside Acura again, determined to part with her on good terms.

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"So it'll be good-bye," I said.

"And good riddance."

"Look," I said. "I've apologized as best I can for what happened to your husband. I don't know what else I can do. I didn't make the world the way it is. Give me a break, okay?"

"We're just different," she said. "I mean Nomads and Residents. We're different kinds of people."

"I'm not sure that's what I've been seeing."

"Then you haven't seen straight. Nomads don't turn people away and Nomads don't collect so much baggage in their lives they can't even move — like lead-walled holo rooms just to play satellite link teledildonics. We don't leave scars on the earth wherever we go. We don't leave anything."

"Maybe some people need less transience in their lives. They need to produce something enduring."

"Human compassion can be enduring. What did you say your profession was?"

"I'm an architect," I said.

"That's not exactly what you told Mack."

"All right. I design parking structures. Portable elevated parking structures."

"*That's* a permanent contribution to life?" she asked.

My ears burned and I found myself focusing on her beadwork vest. In L.A., people always told me they were grateful for what I did. "Nomads are a bit primitive, you know," I said.

Now she laughed. "That's what they've been saying since the beginning of civilization. The Romans defined Nomads legally as *animals*. But cities are violent at a rate twenty times that of nomadic life. The violence goes back to Cain and Abel. Cain was the settler, remember. The Resident. Abel was the shepherd, the Nomad."

Could she be right? Cain the first land developer? Cain the architect of the first parking lot? Now I wanted to make her ears burn. "You people still use fossil fuels," I countered, even though I knew by now that the diesels were only used during storms. "Anyway, you're exaggerating the hostility."

She looked at me with measured skepticism. "What *about* Kill a Nomad Day? September first this year, right?"

"That's just sort of a drive-by thing," I said uneasily. "It could have happened to me, before Mack picked me up. I'll grant you this," I admitted,

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remembering the relief with which I left the shoulder of the freeway for even the strange rig. "Nomads have more compassion." I took a deep breath. "At least I can still get out of your way. Mack said we'd make Hubbard's Cave tomorrow. I'll be gone. Back to my job, my neurotic fiancée, a Rottweiler who pees on my tires. I'm sorry we couldn't get along."

She looked at me. Something else irritated her now. "I'm sorry too," she said, and looked away.

The sunrise was blinding red, all toxic haze. The complex swirl of looping wide ramps we were descending from the west culminated in a phantasmagoria of cloverleafs and delicate concrete columns supporting roads on a dozen levels. Traffic glinted in the sun, stretching east and south as far as I could see. A huge billboard under the signature of Mayor Richard Daley XXIII welcomed travelers to the Kennedy-Tristate Interface at Chicago, "the largest intersection in the world."

There was something festive about the place, the carnival lettering of the sign, the red and blue flags of the moving Nomad markets. The legendary break in the membrane, Hubbard's Cave, turned out to be a wide tunnel where an expressway passed beneath Hubbard Street, so deep into the city it would take us all day to drive there. Mack described for me a set of service doors in the tunnel wall I'd be looking for, and I practiced stepping out of the cab as far down as the footplate.

The dry run turned into a close call. A gust pulled Ryder's cap from his head and he nearly tumbled off the rig snatching it. I grabbed a handful of his jacket and held on until he steadied himself, a dicey piece of footwork, it turned out, for me too. Acura gave me a grateful smile, then said she was embarrassed that she'd been so unfriendly the day before. So it looked like we'd be parting on good terms after all.

We made a turn southeast through the Jefferson Park district in late morning: the traffic of Chicago lay beside us, undulating like a sea. At Edens Junction Ryder and I watched lane surfers jumping the median fence to run their ATVs back upstream, then downstream again at high speed, in elegant cuts across eight or ten lanes of waves of vehicles, touching bumpers as they slid by.

I was exhilarated and frightened by turns that day. We sighted the tunnel entrance first at four, an ugly wide maw in the distance swallowing traffic like Charybdis swallowing the sea. Ryder had been chattering away about how

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excited I must be going back to HoloGolf and BumperBuses in L.A. but even he fell silent when we drove through the dim green lights surrounding the tunnel mouth and into the dark heart of it. It was a wild place, all roar and whine of gears. The high-pitched scream of roller bearings wailed against some deep thumping in the guts of it all, like a slow evil heartbeat. Dust in the air intensified the darkness.

"It's up there," Mack said, squinting through the windshield at a faint glow ahead. "In that strip of yellow light on the right." We all squinted, trying to make sense of dark shapes moving ominously in dirty air. Mack interrupted my distracted good-byes. "Something's wrong. I can't..."

We all saw the problem at once: down the ramp of a merging tunnel on our right rolled a fleet of four-by-fours, black pickups and vans with enormous soft tires. Sounding airhorns they were surging forward, bumping the traffic ahead, rising over it, gyrating, crushing their way forward in purple light.

They were replicas of the truck I'd seen in L.A., the one with the hood with the wolfish snout that had risen above the gridlock. The whole of the wide tunnel began to fill with the glistening black shapes as the fleet swept across the lanes on Nomad roofs. The coppery tang of fear in my mouth turned bitter now.

Yet some part of me marveled at what I saw: what traffic! what a nightmare!

"How are you going to get out?" Ryder cried.

Two lanes over a Nomad work crew was crushed before our eyes as one of the monster trucks descended on a canvas-topped Omar. One of the four-by-fours took on a big articulated loadcarrier just ahead; a figure leaped down from the passenger's side of the truck with a chainsaw.

"They're *hijackers*," Mack shouted.

Mack was driving for his life. A four-by-four started bouncing on us. Mack fended it off with a thick aluminum pole with a shotgun shell at its end, a bang stick, which he extended out of his window and fired against one of the monster truck's fat tires. The truck tumbled away into accumulating wreckage.

"The right lane's blocked," Ryder cried.

Through the twisted metal I could see peds fighting around the service doors in the membrane; I thought I saw one make it through. "Just get me close," I said.

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"*No,*" Acura said. "*Don't go.* It's too dangerous."

"A promise is a promise," I told her. "I can't ask for more from you good people. Good-bye."

A yellow van crashed on the left and burst into flame. I thought of just falling to the pavement and accepting my fate, but I resolved anew not to die in traffic without a fight. I took a deep breath and opened the door. Noise and bad air flooded the cabin. We were bumped again, from above, as I swung out. A monster truck's fat tire, near enough for me to feel its black heat on my face, bulged and quivered; in the din I heard a chainsaw start up.

Mack and Ryder and Acura were goners if the chainsaw cut through their roof. I saw an opening to the right but yelled for Mack's bang stick instead. I swung it up and blew the truck's tire, taking a scrape as the entire black shape slid between me and what had been my path to the service doors. They were already behind us. I thought about running back on the roofs of the slower vehicles and timed a leap for a wrecked trash hauler dead in its lane just as a diesel tanker rammed the wall and burst into flame.

"*No,*" three voices screamed in the din. And as I jumped someone grabbed me, someone sweet-smelling and strong enough to pull me back through the door with a grunt.

"We'll try New York," Mack said as I slumped against the dash. "There's a place, the Core.... You'll have a better shot. This is crazy."

"...even if we have to drive back to L.A.," Acura said.

Ryder shouted that he saw the end of the tunnel, a white ring of daylight in the distance.

I was shivering with cold and fear. I felt Acura slipping something over my shoulders — the burgundy leather jacket Mack had let me wear days before.

The strange thing was how, when we were leaving the tunnel, another Nomad survivor waved in companionship, waved with the four raised fingers of the Nomad salute, waved directly at me. It felt pretty good to wave back.

We looped through Detroit. Mack had arranged for repairs and alterations to his rig, and we docked with an enormous moving custom shop.

We hadn't realized until Indiana how badly his left arm had been crushed fending off the first four-by-four. Acura became exhausted pulling extra shifts driving, and circling the freeways of Detroit in the gray air before we docked, I'd started driving shifts too. The rig seemed alive to me then, a

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huge powerful animal beneath my hands, a wounded animal, but one that would stay the course.

While they worked on the damage I took in a number of Nomad Campfires — in Detroit, they burned scrap lumber — and listened to stories of pirates and Road Runners and feuds and radical rigs, threads in the fabric of Nomad lore. An old transmission specialist recreated tales of historic traffic jams so convincingly I forgot where I was.

"I dunno," Mack grumbled beneath the swath of bandages around his shoulder, his spirits low. "How the hell can you forget you're living on a conveyor belt?"

"But sometimes it's wonderful," I said. "Being a Nomad is like being one of those birds who are only really alive when they're in motion, like a tern, or an albatross. There's a poetic side."

"Now you're getting it," Acura said. And then she kissed me, a soft kiss on the cheek.

"I might even miss you when you're gone," she said.

Ryder rolled his eyes.

WE DROVE through Ontario, an idyll of flat land and small caravans. We crossed the Niagara into thick freight moving through Buffalo and made the turn downstate when we hit the Hudson River.

Four days out of Detroit, New York City traffic appeared in the distance as a tight Byzantine mosaic simmering under the late afternoon sun. The Nomad Way went underground, merged with the Interface they called the Core, then ascended into steep-walled canyons of glass and steel buildings whose only exits seemed gridlocked streets leading to gridlocked avenues whose vestigial traffic signals served as standards for the electronic membrane, like buoys marking channels. The Nomads kept in motion somehow, backing and turning, creeping klick by klick downtown toward the Core's center with glacial inexorability.

Day turned to siren-filled night turned to bleak daylight once again. Residents on cross-streets and in storefronts watched us with indifference, watched the Nomad rigs streaked with road dirt from around the country as if they were all just loads of freight shifting through the lowest form of transport; yet down the sidestreets we could see traffic that had been frozen

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in place for days, Residents making camp on the spot like Nomads, trucks, even buses, that had been abandoned, festive street markets, packs of derelicts around fires in drums, even silver-suited Residents fighting over cabs that were not likely to move until nightfall.

Although we knew they'd be coming, we all went pale when we saw the black pickups, the monster trucks, again on the third day. A fleet even bigger than the one that had swept through Hubbard's Cave rose on a cross-street and poured through a break in the electronic membrane so huge it seemed the four-bys had official sanction to harass and hijack Nomads.

This time drivers like Mack were ready. He hit a switch and his own newly installed hyperextendable tires began to inflate and the rig rose and shifted into sixteen wheel drive. Using a pile of street rubble as a ramp we surged up over the back of a transfer cab onto the roofs of ordinary traffic, joining a second level bright in the sunlight between highrises, our weight so broadly distributed we rode over the mass of Nomad rigs without crushing them. Then the big rigs like Mack's proceeded to scatter the lighter pickups of the hijackers and smear a few into the membrane. Even through the noise of chainsaws and gunshots and the gnashing of gears you could hear the Nomad cheers. We headed south toward Washington Square, our eventual destination, right down the famous Interface at Fifth Avenue, the new fleet of upper-level Nomad vehicles turning back two more attacks by swarms of black trucks.

I thought I was heading home to Denise that day. I played a last game of license plate poker with Ryder, sketched a shelf design to reorganize Acura's closet (parking lot architects do have some transferable skills), and tried to come to terms with my regrets. I volunteered for a last shift at the wheel so my friends would be rested when they turned to exit the Core.

So I was the first one to spot the trouble. We'd been prepared for the second level of traffic on lower Fifth (indeed, we were part of it); we'd been prepared for the gridlock in Washington Square; we'd even been prepared for the sight of the mangled bodies of those who didn't quite make it to the service door in the base of the Arch which led to a subway station and escape from Nomad territory.

But none of us were prepared for the sight and sound of a third generation of black trucks which rose above the second tier of traffic. These were huge sixty-four wheelers, big as houses, powered by gas turbines so loud their roar shook the city for blocks. They came from the lower east side, their enormous

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tires proceeding to crush even the bigger Nomad rigs on the second level beneath their treads. Heading toward the Arch was like accepting a fate as filling in a traffic sandwich, rigs above, rigs below.

"This traffic is awesome," Mack said. "It'll kill us. Maybe the only way to get you across is back in L.A."

I realized then how good it felt to know I was going to keep riding with Mack and Acura and Ryder.

We bailed out of the west side of Washington Square. In New Jersey we picked up a load of freight to tow in order to pay our way, and settled back in for a non-stop to Los Angeles.

We drove south through Kentucky, the days idyllic with Nomad music and warming weather. Near Lexington, after I'd finished remodeling Ryder's bunk area, fixed the plumbing, and even worked on the auxiliary diesel replacing glow-plugs, Acura asked if I thought about staying on the road.

It was not my best moment. I was trying to get pipe sealant from beneath my fingernails and the smell of grease out of my hair. "I miss my sensurround couch," I told her. "I miss my VR suit, I miss Denise — well, I dunno about Denise...." My stomach grumbled. "I miss Instant Lunch. I even miss making goddamned Instant Lunch in my cubicle at work."

"Is it really better than Mom's vegetable soup?" Ryder asked after a moment.

I closed my eyes, and remembered. "Okay, definitely not. And your mom's twice the woman Denise is."

"I can understand missing your dog," Ryder said.

"I didn't say I missed Rot. Truth is, he doesn't have enough space to be normal. He lives in Denise's parking space and pees on my tires. Denise could keep him."

"I noticed your hair's growing longer," Mack pitched in.

"You look good in Nomad clothes too, you know," Acura said.

"But who...? I mean whose rig? Who's willing to...?"

"We are," she said. "Me and Ryder and Mack."

The first time I made love with Acura, among the pillows and quilts on the wide bed at the back of the rig, was during a deep moonless night. Afterward I cranked open the big hatch above us and we lay on our backs watching the sky together, her body warm against mine and sweet with the

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odors of spice and wild vanilla. The sky seemed huge, the stars brilliant. It felt like flying.

And that's how I came to stay.

Acura put it best. Traveling, she says, is good for the brain. It's true: you get a sense of physical and mental well-being from a journey. The monotony of settlement weaves patterns in the brain that make you feel tired and small; traveling makes you feel bigger.

"It's a spiritual thing," Acura says.

True again, I say. Every day's an act of renewal on the road. Why do you think they had pilgrimages in the old days? Dante's journey may have started in hell, but it got him to heaven.

Of course, had we really tried to get me back across in L.A. (I thought of dropping in to settle my affairs), I'm not sure I could have left The Way if I'd wanted to. All the in-city Interfaces had been blocked off when we returned — apparently from total gridlock in the urban corridor from Malibu south to San Diego. We had to drop our load in Bakersfield.

On Mack's more pessimistic days, when his sore shoulder bothers him, he sees the increase in both city and Nomad traffic and the fleets of black trucks as indicative of a "swarming stage" in the cycle of human population. Some guy named Malthus wrote about it long ago. It's like the suicidal march of the lemmings in Scandinavia; the increased aggressive migrations signal an end for the species in global starvation.

But my new bunkmate is more positive. Each day is a new beginning, Acura says. The journey is eternal, each klick a step along The Way, *Il-Rah*, The Tao. That's why, she says, we will find the human future in space, and why the first great travelers there will come from the ranks of the Nomads. Ryder's electronic school has already acquainted him with mobile launching.

The problems seem distant to me now, since we've crossed the land bridge from Alaska into Asia. Of course Nomads have been on the roads here for years — the first mobile factories came out of Thailand, the first great wheeled musk herds out of Ulan Bator.

Still, it's the experience of a lifetime to hit Outer Mongolia and watch the traffic finally start to thin out. The road is gold across the steppes in the morning light as we steer toward Irkutsk and thousands of klicks to drive.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE WRONG WAY TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT

WHEN WAS it that the hero and the villain of science fiction and fantasy films became nearly interchangeable? I can't seem to tie it to an exact date. And I can't point an accusing finger at a particular film and say: "*This* is when it changed." Perhaps it was an encroaching rot, like some ooze from outer space, or the invasion of pod people.

I only know that far too many of the speculative films I'm seeing these days seem morally empty — as well as illogical and thoroughly boring. And violent. Far too violent.

No, I'm not about to call for controls and labels. I would like to call for a little taste and discernment on the part of the viewing public, however. We deserve something better than what we're getting these days. Remember when science fiction films explored social and political and moral issues through stories just on the other side of our perception of present-day reality? I remember movies like that. I just don't see them very often anymore.

Sometime around the time Arnold Schwarzenegger became the global box-office champ and undisputed top movie-star of the world, things began to change. And the science fiction film became the almost sole property of the "action" stars. Therein, I believe, lies the problem. You might not believe this, but I truly do like action movies. But I resent it when the action takes precedence over all other aspects of the film.

When a movie's entire storyline is written to provide frequent opportunities for firepower and fisticuffs, the finer aspects of plot and character — not to mention logic — invariably fall by the wayside.

Timecop, a generously budgeted

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time-travel cop-chop-socky flick, is (like *Demolition Man* last year) a perfect example of all that is wrong with science fiction film today.

The basic plot starts in 1994, and concerns the discovery of a "chip" that allows for backward time-travel. (It's never quite clear why you can only go back in time. My guess is that they didn't have the budget for futuristic sets.) Although the government had funded the research to develop it, the implications of this research breakthrough now has security agencies and congressional oversight committees worried.

Too late, the federal regulators realize how dangerous it would be if folks could go back and monkey with the past. History is, they decide, a delicate organism. Altering it in any way could have disastrous effects. So, they decide to form a secret police unit called the Time Enforcement Commission.

Right there, about four minutes into the movie I hit my first wall. Why, I wonder, don't they just destroy the "chip" and related research, or post guards at the only existing prototypes for the time travel vehicles? The movie never bothers to answer such an obvious question, of course. But it didn't take me long to figure it out for myself: If the authorities did the logical thing, there wouldn't be any excuse for the film's star, Jean-Claude Van Damme (the muscles from Brussels), to flit to and fro in time, kicking and punching people, as a founding member of this elite police unit.

I had to keep chanting that answer, like a mantra, throughout my viewing of *Timecop*. The movie served as an excellent showcase for Van Damme's kickboxing prowess. But that was the only aspect of the film that really worked. Or *needed* to work, presumably.

Very quickly, I stopped wondering why a space-age cop packing a nifty splat-zap gun never used it. It was because — in case you've forgotten the universal response, already — Mr. Van Damme looked too pretty flailing his tootsies. (A variation upon that classic comedy bit suggests itself: Jean-Claude faces off with a baddy and starts kicking and leaping about. The guy watches him with interest for a few seconds and then calmly draws his ray gun out and shoots J-C between the eyes, mid-kick. End of movie. I wish.)

There are some things in a film that seem odd, but don't really bother me much. Like that a cop with a heavy (at times nearly incomprehensible) Belgian accent sports the oddly anglo moniker of Max Walker. Hey, I don't sweat the little stuff. But I'm

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not talking about inconsequential things.

Timecop repeatedly cheats its central plot device of time travel, and is more than a tad muddled about the secondary issue of a man from the future occupying the same timeframe as his younger self.

For example, in an early scene, Walker must go back to 1929 to capture his former timecop partner who is now a time bandit, cleaning up on a panicky Wall Street. Walker wants to know who corrupted his friend. (At least, I *think* the guy is supposed to be a friend. The film spends absolutely no time establishing a relationship between these two fellows. That would have required editing out a few kicks, I guess.)

Walker's partner refuses to officially identify the real villain — a corrupt senator, Aaron McComb (Ron Silver), with presidential ambitions to finance — claiming that his evil boss had threatened the lives of his family. But, just as the poor schmo expected, his time-thievery and silence win him a sentence of death by TEC's secret tribunal. They execute him in 1929. But how does that protect his family? Wouldn't his children no longer exist in 2004?

Timecop is absolutely chock-full of such violations of time logic. While it's certainly true that sf stories can set their own reality, you have to clue the audience in as to what that reality is. It would have been easy for an experienced time-traveler like Walker, or the scientist who invented the chip, or some other knowledgeable character to explain away some of these (shall we call them) inconsistencies.

But such is the contempt these filmmakers feel for their audience that they can't even manage a simple throw-away line of rationalization. (Why bother, when all that matters is that J-C looks way buff doing the splits on his kitchen counter wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.)

And what's with the end of the movie? It wipes out ten years of the lead character's life without any exploration of what it would mean to a man to come home to a ten-year-old son he's never met. Or how Max could maintain a meaningful relationship, having missed ten years of a marriage to a wife he thought was dead. And what about his doppelgänger parallel self, seen in earlier scenes? Wouldn't he still be around to take issue with an identical interloper?

(Who knows? Who cares....when J-C goes Pow! — Slam! — Thwack! on a state-of-the-art sound system.)

If you're going to write a story about the time paradox, deal with it.

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Don't try to pass off trash like this as a movie. Peter Hyams (*Capricorn One, Outland, 2010*) is not the world's greatest director, but he knows something about science fiction film. You'd never know it from this confusing kickfest.

There is, however, something that troubled me even more about *Timecop* than the absurdities of the plot, and that is the cavalier morality of the hero.

Toward the end of the film, the psychotic politician villain (played with wild-eyed relish and real skill by Mr. Silver) challenges Walker, the true-blue time enforcement officer, with a pesky little moral conundrum. As Walker is about to willfully alter the future by offing his foe (by pushing a 1994 McComb into his 2004 counterpart), the batty senator offers the observation: "You're no better than me." To which our hero self-righteously sneers that, on the contrary, *he* is "setting things right."

Sorry, Max, my man, but I'm gonna have to side with the politico-from-hell on this one. Early in the film, while discussing the inherent dangers of the newly developed time-travel chip, much is made of the fragility of our shared past. The TEC, to which Walker has pledged his allegiance, holds the realistic passage of time as nearly sacred. Even a supreme evil like Hitler, they feel, must not be eradicated in retrospect, for there is no way of predicting what negative impact might result from even a positive change in history.

And still, Max does what he does for largely selfish reasons. He wants his wife to live. (His concern for the rest of mankind is obviously a secondary consideration.) There is, therefore, little moral difference between his actions and those of the Senator, or those of his wretched executed-for-his-sins ex-partner.

Again, I might have excused this, if the movie had had Max Walker agonize over his decision, worry about it later, or (wouldn't this have been interesting?) face a tribunal later for crimes against his own code. But characters played by Jean-Claude Van Damme don't agonize over anything.

There are several reasons for this. One is that Le Hunk cannot act. He's trying, poor soul, but he just can't do it. He can scowl. And he can muster a pained grimace. But that is the extent of his emotional range as an actor.

Still, I don't think it's J-C's lack of theatrical finesse that constitutes the main reason that Max Walker violates his professional pledge, and feels positively cheery about it. It is that, in an action movie, what the hero does is in every way morally

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justifiable, *because he is the hero of an action movie.* There is no room for ethical debate, here. What Jean-Claude Van Damme does in a film is pure and righteous because he is Jean-Claude Van Damme (and he looks so comely and macho when he kicks his legs).

But a hero is only a hero when s/he acts like one. And in action sf and fantasy, the film's protagonist is often as callous and brutal as the worst villain. Max Walker is certainly a warmer bloke than your average Schwarzenegger hero, but he is still entitled to do what he bloody well pleases. And when he kills a foe, he's liable to do so with a cruel (but rarely clever) joke, like "ooh, that's gotta hurt."

Timecop reminded me, somewhat, of another action fantasy of earlier this year, Brandon Lee's sad, sad, swan song, *The Crow*. Like *Timecop*, that movie sprang from the modern comic book field — which may, in part, help explain the frequent and repetitive violence and the lack of a cogent, complex storyline.

The Crow and *Timecop* both force their heroes to spend a lot of time in the dark, in the rain. (How noir can you get!) And both tie the love of a good woman to vengeful acts.

The Crow is undeniably atmospheric. And the late Mr. Lee's performance is haunting in ways that have nothing to do with his tragic death on the set. (Alas, unlike Van Damme, young Brandon showed signs of real acting ability, as well as considerable screen charisma. All wasted forever in a violent scene that was supposed to be make-believe.) But atmosphere and sick curiosity can only do so much for a movie. And, in the end, *The Crow* isn't very good because it has little to offer except violent action and unrelenting rainfall.

Rock musician Eric Draven was probably a nice guy in life. But we only see him as a hate-filled mime, back from the dead, and seeking vengeance for himself and his slaughtered fiancé. He is supposed to be a hero. But what he is is a cold-blooded killer.

In scene after scene, he hunts down the murderous drug fiends who ended his own life, and he methodically snuffs them. It all gets rather tedious after a while. And it's not my idea of heroic redemption, either. (Some of the movie posters for *The Crow* show Lee's stooped, punk ghost with the legend "Believe in Angels." This is an angel? Only in a heaven where Charles Bronson is god.)

As I said, I actually like action movies. But there is a difference

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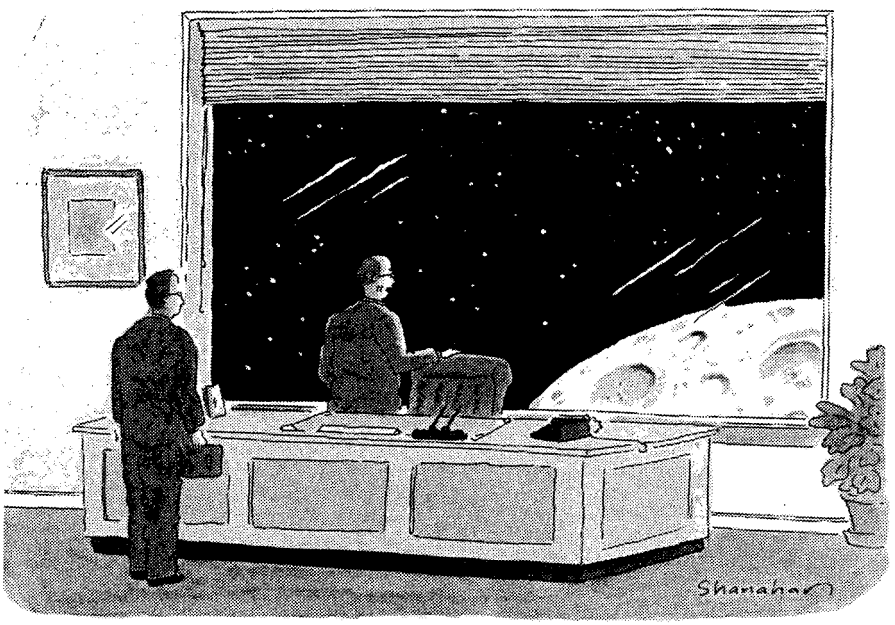
between action and violence. And there is a difference between an action story that contains violence, and one that is consumed by it.

Speed, from this past summer, isn't a science fiction film, but it is, I think, a great example of a genuinely suspenseful, fun-to-watch action film that doesn't debase humanity. The good guy is much more interested in saving the lives of innocent people than in ending the lives of people he has deemed guilty. The story, although improbable, works. People in the movie actually relate to one another. (And, as an added bonus for me, there was even a heroic — but never macha — woman in one of the leads.)

Science fiction film buffs deserve movies at least that good. But, for the most part, we're not getting them. And we probably won't get them until we stop giving inferior flicks like *Timecop* our box office dollars.



"And worth every damn penny!"

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K.D. Wentworth has published short fiction in magazines from Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *to* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *Her first tale for F&SF ("Sacred Ground") appeared in our October/November issue in 1993. Since then, she has turned her attention to the novels she is publishing through Del Rey Books.* (House of Moons, *the sequel to* Moonspeaker, *will be on the stands in May.)*

About "As You Sow," she writes, "This story came from a comment my grandmother made to me. She said she had gone to buy some birdseed and the salesman asked her what kind of birds she was going to plant." From such an innocent comment grew this powerful tale about an unusual harvest.

As You Sow

By K.D. Wentworth

THE MARKET STALLS TEEMED with chattering wives and white-bearded old men whose arguing voices vied with the screech of the gulls overhead in the ice-blue spring sky. Ungern smelled the salt spray in the breeze and wished he could watch the boats in the harbor instead of returning to break his back in the landlord's endless flax fields.

"Birdseed!" a querulous voice rose over all the others. "Come and buy my fine seed!"

Ungern craned his head, trying to see to the end of the cobbled street. Yes, that was him, Konstantin Pöeg, the last birdseed merchant in all of Estonia. He felt a surge of relief. Sonya would have flayed the hide off him if he had arrived too late.

The old peddler, a small, bristly man with wild-looking eyes, plucked at the burlap bags laid out before him on a wobbly plank table. "So, friend, what sort of birds shall you plant this year?"

Ungern reached into his pocket. "Nightingales." He laid a single copper coin down on the peddler's table.

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"Nightingales." Pöeg stroked his bushy white beard. "Well, if I had some left, they would cost two coppers a seed. As it is, I'm afraid I sold all I had three villages ago."

"Oh." In his mind, Ungern saw how his wife's raisin-black eyes would stare holes through his body if he came home without her seeds. She meant to have nightingales this summer, and if she didn't get her way, there would be no peace or comfort in his one-room cottage for much longer than he cared to think about. He cleared his throat. "Haven't you got something else for one copper?"

"Now, let me see." The old man poked through his heap of burlap sacks, then picked one up. "What about some fine fat geese? I can let you have two of my best grays for one copper."

A tantalizing vision of roast goose and golden-yoked boiled eggs floated through Ungern's head; then he sighed and slid the lonely coin back into his pocket. "My wife has her heart set on songbirds and one copper is all we have."

"One copper will not even cover my expenses on songbirds!" The peddler leaned over the plank table. "I suppose you think just anyone can harvest birdseed. Well, if you don't find the eggs before the new life quickens, they hatch all by themselves in the ordinary way. Have you ever tried climbing a towering tree to find a nest, not to mention a cliff, or fought your way into a bramble thicket? Why else do you think harvesting birdseed is a dying craft? It needs a young man's strength."

Ungern lowered his gaze. "Thank you anyway." He turned to go.

"Wait!" The peddler's hand flashed out and gripped his shirt. "I may have just the thing!" With his other hand, he reached below the table and brought up a small grimy bag tied shut with a bit of string.

"What kind of seed is that?" Ungern squinted at the bedraggled paper label, but the written characters were little more than faded squiggles.

"Something very special left over from several years ago." The old man's wrinkled face beamed. "A little exotic for some folk, but you have the look of a man who can appreciate life's finest. I can't guarantee that all of it will sprout, so I'll let you have a full one half of this bag for one copper."

"Half?" Ungern picked up the tiny bag, feeling the seeds shift inside. There must be dozens. He had never been able to afford more than four birdseeds at a time in his whole life.

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"All right, the whole thing then." Pöeg folded his arms across his bony chest. "I must say though, sir, you drive a hard bargain. It's not often a man gets the best of me."

A smile stole over Ungern's face as he replaced the single copper on the table. "Thank you!"

"Well, I need to clear out my stock." The peddler leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Frankly, my bones are getting too old to harvest seed anymore. I love it, but it's really a young man's craft. I need someone to take over the collecting end of the business. Why don't you spend a few weeks in the forest with me and learn the trade?"

"Leave the fields?" Ungern's forehead wrinkled at the thought. "That would be wonderful!" But then he considered the consequences — if he did that, the landlord would take back their cottage. He and Sonya would have to live in a hut in the forest, and he could not see her agreeing to anything as drastic as that. "But I'm afraid I have responsibilities."

"That's what they all say." Pöeg scowled. "Time was when people knew what was important. They wanted a little beauty and song in their life, but no one cares anymore. After I die, no one will be left who remembers how to find seeds before they hatch. Where will people go for birds then?"

No more birdseed? Ungern tucked the bag inside his shirt, trying to imagine a spring in which the only birds he saw were there by chance. It was a lonely thought.

"So, *Ungern*?" Sonya's heavy eyebrows marched upward with the same forcefulness with which she did everything. "I suppose you took the marketplace by storm."

Ungern sighed. It was a nuisance to be named after a famous pirate. When people heard your name, they always thought you were full of pepper and nails when just the opposite was true. He could still see the disappointment in Sonya's dark eyes whenever she looked at him; eight years ago she had thought him to be someone else, someone bigger and wider, taller inside. But he wasn't. He was just Ungern the farmer, and not such a good farmer at that.

Sonya dried her large, capable hands on her apron. "You did get my seeds, didn't you?"

"Of course, dear, actually more than last year." He pulled the burlap sack out of his shirt and set it in the middle of the freshly scrubbed table.

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She clucked her tongue. "That is a lot, too much, in fact. What's the matter— is something wrong with it? Did you let that disgusting old peddler cheat you?"

"No, no." Ungern opened the sack and poured out the seeds, suddenly aware that Pöeg had never exactly said what sort of seeds these were. "See? They're nice and dry, not a bit of mold or rot."

"Are you sure these are nightingales?" She poked at them with her finger. "They're much larger than any songbird seeds I've ever seen."

A knot the size of a foot swelled in Ungern's throat. He brushed the seeds into a heap, then back into the bag. The peddler had said they were special, he told himself, and what was the use of upsetting Sonya until he knew for sure? "I'll plant them this evening when I come home."

"I suppose that will have to do." Sonya rapped a wooden spoon against the side of the soup pot, then bent down to scoop up a handful of kindling for the fire. "But don't be late. The sooner they're in the ground, the sooner I'll have my birds."

A week later, the pale-green shoots pushed their rounded heads out of the ground. Ungern studied them nervously, but could tell no difference from the vines of previous years when they'd sown skylarks and warblers.

As they grew, the tiny plants straightened their bowed heads and stretched for the sky, adding pointed leaves along their stems. In two weeks, they reached the height of his knees and were visibly bigger each morning, twining and looping across the garden.

The rapid rate of growth troubled him. He couldn't remember any previously purchased variety growing so fast. He knelt in the rich black soil and tugged at an insistent weed. Of course, on the other hand, he told himself, the added height might be a sign of superiority. No doubt the best songbirds always came from the tallest vines.

As they grew taller, he staked each twisting, dark-green vine and tied it firmly with thin strips of linen. Elongated white pods formed near the tops, two to each vine.

One rainy, gray morning, Sonya stopped by the kitchen garden on her way to feed the pigs. She gazed at the sinuous vines for a long silent moment. "They should be hatching soon."

"Yes, soon, " Ungern murmured, keeping his eyes on the weeds.

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"But why are they so big?" She balanced the bowl of slops on her jutting hip and fingered a pod. "Is there more than one bird in each?"

"That — must be it," Ungern agreed, while a little voice inside his head nagged he was just postponing his misery.

Sonya narrowed her eyes and went on to her pigs.

Two days later, Ungern was just tying up the last of his weekly shipment of fodder to the landlord, when he heard a distinct peeping. Giving the twine a final twist, he dropped the bale of hay to the ground and bounded up to the garden.

At the base of the glossy green vines, several small white shapes tottered back and forth. He ran harder, knowing from the previous years this moment was critical; unless the newly hatched chicks saw him within the first hour of hatching, they would fly away as soon as their feathers were mature, instead of staying near the cottage all summer to delight Sonya with their song.

At the sight of him, the white hatchlings retreated into the vines. He dropped to his knees, whispering, "Come, babies, come."

The dark-green leaves rustled.

He held out his fingers and waggled them invitingly. "Come to Ungern."

A small white head poked out of the leaves, then the young bird inched forward, its bright black eyes fixed on his face. He clucked encouragingly at it. "Come, babies."

Another appeared behind it, then another, each with a long curving neck and frowning hooked beak that seemed to have been dipped in black ink. His heart skipped a beat. These were most definitely not nightingales or goldfinches or larks or any other sort of bird he had ever seen before in his life.

The nearest chick opened its bizarre bill in a tentative, unmelodic squawk, then circled him shakily on skinny, impossibly long legs.

Ungern sat back on his heels. What in the name of Saint Peter had that peddler sold him? If he squinted, they looked a little like geese, but those legs! Their heads already reached as high as his shins, and they were only just hatched.

Pulling his shirttail out, he made a makeshift sling to carry the three downy chicks to the drying shed where Sonya wouldn't see them. Perhaps, he told himself as he cradled the soft, warm bodies against his chest, the sack had held a variety of seeds. Perhaps the rest of the hatchlings would be

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songbirds, wonderful ones with soul-lifting melodies no one around here had ever heard before.

Perhaps tomorrow would be better.

More awkward, long-necked chicks hatched the next day, and again the next. Each time, he quickly bundled them up and hid them in the shed by the pond.

On the fourth day, he stopped to chop some kindling before joining his brothers in the fields. One minute, he was swinging the axe at the block of wood on the old stump, grunting a little with each blow, the next, he was running, trying to locate the source of Sonya's piercing screams.

"What — what is — that?" One hand to her mouth, she pointed at a honking, long-necked chick as it waded into the pond's green water on legs that looked like stilts.

"Oh, that." Ungern noticed how her staring eyes were practically all whites. "That's one of our new — "

"New *what*, Ungern?" Gathering up her long skirts, Sonya ventured nearer to the muddy edge of the pond.

The sound of menace in her voice made his skin crawl. "New birds."

"Our new birds!" She moved in closer. "Are you trying to tell me these misshapen things are my nightingales?"

"Well..." He watched helplessly as two more downy, long-legged chicks squirmed through a crack in the drying shed and ambled toward the pond. "The peddler didn't have any nightingales, and besides, prices were up. Songbirds cost at least two coppers this year. This was all I could get, but he did say they were very special."

"Those monstrosities are the ugliest things I've ever seen!" She shuddered as one chick inverted its down-bent bill and plunged its head beneath the water.

"They're not that bad." Ungern reached down as a dozen or so white chicks gathered around his knees. "And after all, see how many we got, a lot more than last year."

Sonya grabbed a chick by its skinny legs and held it up while it squawked and thrashed its wings. "I suppose I could try cooking one." She plucked a feather. "They might at least be good to eat."

"Eat!" Horrified, Ungern snatched the panicked chick from her. He

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turned it right side up and cradled it against his chest where he could feel its heart thumping like a runaway horse.

"Well, of course, *eat.*" Sonya crossed her arms across her ample bosom. "It's obvious they can't sing, and they're certainly not good to look at. What else can we do with them?"

"They're just babies!" Lowering his head, he cuddled the terrified chick against his cheek. "You can't *eat* them."

"I'm certainly not going to feed the wretched things." She jerked aside as a chick tottered close to her skirt. "And don't let me catch you giving them the chickens' corn either." She brushed her hands off and turned sharply around, heading for the cottage at a ground-eating pace that boded trouble.

"Never mind," Ungern whispered to the bird in his arms. He watched a wading chick pull its beak out from under the shallow water, dripping with weeds and mud. "You wouldn't like corn anyway."

OVER THE following weeks, Sonya scolded him about his poor hatchlings every morning when he went out to the fields, and every night when he returned. Until he got rid of those stupid-looking things, she said, he would never have a moment's peace.

And so—his dinner was burned, his clothes unwashed, and his bed most decidedly cold.

But Ungern decided he hadn't known the true meaning of misery until his two strapping brothers found out about his birds.

"I swear, Kaarel, those things had legs as long as a woman's!" Jaan, the oldest, yellow-haired and broad-shouldered, grinned as he hitched up a drowsing brown ox. "And thin as sticks!"

His younger brother, Kaarel, who towered above him by almost a head, paused in the middle of loading the cart with flax bound for the lord's storehouse. His broad face puckered with the effort of thought. "It doesn't sound as though there'd be much meat on the drumsticks."

"They're not for eating." Ungern didn't look up from the farm cart's balky rear wheel. "Shut up and hand me that grease."

"If you're not going to eat them, then why did you plant them?" Kaarel passed him the tin of axle grease, then squatted down beside him in the wagon ruts.

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"Not everything in this world has to be practical, Kaarel." Ungern pried the lid off and scooped up a fingerful of strong-smelling black grease for the squeaky wheel. "Some things are just good to look at." A faint smile twitched at his lips. "You should see them when they fly. Up in the air, they look just like beautiful white swans."

"Yeah, well, swans are for the ponds of lords, not peasants like us." Jaan hung on the edge of the wagon and stared down at him. "And besides, swans never had such ridiculous long skinny legs."

"I ate a swan the winter before last." Kaarel's gray eyes misted over in fond recollection. "It landed on our pond by mistake. Mina boiled it in a soup."

A small figure came bobbing across the shorn fields, shouting and waving its arms. Ungern brushed his hands off on his work pants and stood up.

"Uncle Ungern! Uncle Ungern!" The figure became his young nephew-by-marriage, Nigol. The boy stopped in front of him, his black hair tousled, his cheeks reddened from running. "Uncle Ungern — Aunt Sonya says to come quick!"

Ungern put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "What's wrong? Is she hurt?"

"No — " Nigol leaned over, one hand on his stomach as he struggled for breath. "She — just says — come!"

Jaan winked. "Maybe your birds are lonely."

Ungern ignored him. "You two had better go on. I'll meet you at the southeast flax field in an hour."

"You'd better." Jaan flicked the languid ox with his birch stick. "You already owe Lord Kreutzwald two days' work from last week. He'll have your neck if you get further behind."

The wagon groaned as the ox leaned into its traces and plodded down the heavily rutted path. Ungern watched his brothers fall into place beside the heavy load, reaching their hands up to steady the bales of flax. He turned to Nigol. "Where is Aunt Sonya?"

"At the pond."

"Well, come on, then." They tramped across the uneven field for a few minutes, their feet crunching through the stiff stubble. "Surely you must have some idea what she wants, " he said finally.

Nigol's brown eyes squinted. "I think it has something to do with all the people."

"What people?"

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"The ones at your pond."

Ungern let that enigmatic reply rattle around in his head. "What are they doing?"

"Looking at those funny birds of yours."

Ungern began to run.

They had come from the village, a rustling, whispering, pointing crowd of women and old men and big-eyed children, all gathered on one side of his pond. Ungern regarded them with dismay as he and Nigol topped the last hill.

Sonya stood in the middle of the whole mess, her shoulders thrown back, her arms crossed, her legs planted like trees. An icy tingle of dread shivered down Ungern's back.

In the pond, his uneasy flock of birds had retreated to the opposite shore which was protected by cattails and thick, brambly brush. There, they watched the crowd nervously, ducking their long, graceful necks, huddling together and muttering in low bird-voices.

"So there you are, you moron!" Sonya's voice rang out, silencing the crowd.

He tried to meet her angry eyes without flinching. "I came as fast as I could."

Over on the other shore, the heavy brush began to crack and snap as a determined, grimy-faced urchin pushed through with a rock in his hand. The shy birds squawked and fluttered their wings, hurriedly wading out toward the middle of the pond.

"Stop that!" Ungern waved his arms at the boy. "Leave them alone! You're scaring them!"

A muffled current of laughter ran through the assembled villagers. Sonya's face darkened.

"Hey, Ungern!" Ants Andreesen, the oldest man for three villages, hobbled to the forefront and held up his walking stick. "I have a bet with Hans here that my wife can cook anything and make it taste fit for the lord's table. I'll give you a copper for two of your fattest birds."

"They're not for sale!" A wave of panic surged through him as, on the other side of the pond, the boy drew back his arm to fling the stone. Without thinking, Ungern plunged into the pond and waded toward him. "Stop that, you young hooligan!"

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Startled, the boy hesitated.

"Go on, get out!" Ungern's feet lost contact with the bottom of the pond. He slipped, swallowed a mouthful of green water, then began to swim, his arms splashing awkwardly, his feet kicking.

The boy giggled, and sailed the rock through the clear morning air. A tall hatchling fell backward with a shriek and thrashed in the water. With almost a single cry, the rest of the flock leaped into the sky, their flapping wings a brilliant blaze of white in the morning sun. Ungern swam harder and two strokes later felt his boots graze the muddy bottom again.

He stood up, waist-deep in the green water and struggled toward the wounded bird. The boy fought his way back through the thicket. Gasping for breath like a beached fish, Ungern gathered the terrified bird to his chest and pinned the flailing wings so he could examine the wound. A spot of bright blood marked one wing where the rock had struck. He began to stroke the poor bird's weaving head, willing calmness into it. "It's all right," he crooned into its hidden ears. "No one else is going to hurt you, no one!"

Across on the shore, the villagers watched him, their mouths open, their eyes staring.

"What's the matter with you?" he shouted at them. "Don't you know anything to do with something rare and beautiful besides kill it or eat it? You've done enough damage for one day! Go home!"

As though a spell had been broken, they glanced at each other and seemed to shake themselves. In mumbling ones and twos, they drifted away, headed for the village or neighboring farms.

Feeling sick inside, he clutched the bird's trembling body closer. It lay against him, exhausted, its eyes half-closed.

"Well, that was certainly a fine show!" Sonya's voice snapped like a whip.

His arms full of limp bird, he began to wade around the edge of the pond, looking for a spot where he could come ashore without having to fight his way through feather-tearing bushes.

"Why didn't you sell old Andreesen some birds, you idiot?" Her hands on her hips, she contemplated him with narrowed eyes. "We could have used the money and everyone can plainly see those stupid birds of yours are worthless."

He slipped on a submerged rock, then caught himself. "Well, they're gone now, so you don't have to worry."

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"And who's to say they won't come back?"

As for that, he thought, struggling up onto the shore, he didn't know whether to hope they would or wouldn't.

He settled the injured bird in a corner of the kitchen, close to the fire, and wrapped it in an old blanket. Fortunately, the injured wing seemed to be more bruised than broken.

It lay there quietly, its eyes dull and pain-hazed, the long legs folded beneath it. He sat on the floor beside it and tried to coax its hooked beak open so he could spoon a bit of warm vegetable soup into its mouth.

"I won't have that filthy, disgusting creature in my clean house!" Sonya watched him from the other side of the room. "Take it outside this instant!"

"Maybe tomorrow, " he said, "if its wing is better. I don't want a fox to get it."

"And I'm telling you that a fox is the least of your worries!"

He glanced up to see her standing before him, dressed in her Sunday-best apron and scarf, holding a lumpy bundle tied up in a sheet.

"Either you take that bird outside right now, or I'm going home to my father's house." Her foot tapped on the floor. "I want an answer, Ungern."

"But I can't." He tucked the blanket more securely around the bird's body and stood up. "It would die."

"Fine." She heaved the bundle of clothes onto her sturdy shoulder. "Maybe a few days alone will teach you to appreciate me. Let me know when you've come to your senses, but you'd better not wait too long. My cousin, Hilda, wants me to live in Tallin with her. She works for a fine family there and says I could get on staff too. I may not want to come back and slave for a mealy-mouthed excuse of a man like you anymore."

Ungern watched her open the door. "Don't you think you're being a little hasty?"

Her only answer was to slam the door behind her.

The next morning, he woke up to find his bird walking around the kitchen and peering at Sonya's pots with curious black eyes. Ungern coaxed a handful of moistened oatmeal down it, then hacked off a chunk of Sonya's dense black bread for himself. Chewing, he tried to decide if he missed her. Somehow, the one-room cottage seemed brighter now, almost cheery.

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Perhaps, he told himself, it wasn't so much that Sonya was gone, but that the bird was here.

Outside, the sky turned a golden rose in the east. He leaned against the side of the open door, enjoying the crisp dawn air on his face, wondering if he should leave the injured bird in the house while he worked in Lord Kreutzwald's fields, or send it back to the pond.

Above, the air began to reverberate with shrill calls and beating wings. He ran out into the yard, scattering Sonya's brown chickens before him, and looked up. A host of slim white birds with black-edged wings circled the pond, once, twice, then landed close to the water on their stilt-like legs, clacking their great, hooked beaks and squawking contentedly.

As he looked at his birds, something inside him hurt, like a sweet note on the violin drawn out to almost unbearable clarity. No matter what anyone else said, they were wonderful, just so incredibly marvelous and strange with their smooth, curving necks and delicate legs; the black on the ends of their beaks and wings was as inky as the inside of a cave, and in the dawn light, their feathers even seemed to have acquired a pinkish cast.

In fact, as he reached the first one, which was already busily seining mud and water through its down-bent bill, he realized its feathers were faintly pink. And it was not the only one. At least half the flock was showing a tendency toward pinkness too.

He didn't know what to make of that — did it portend good health or bad? He wished he could ask the old peddler. There was just so much that he would have liked to know.

"Ungern Aavik!"

Turning around, he saw a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder trotting up on a sturdy, big-hooved chestnut gelding. "Yes?" he said, shading his eyes as he looked into the rising sun, then shuddered. It was Juri Masaryk, the landowner's overseer, a heavy-browed, slump-shouldered man with a penchant for the whip.

"Lord Kreutzwald sent me after you. What's your problem? Do you think that flax jumps into the wagon by itse — " Masaryk broke off, his mouth sagging under his black mustache as he stared at the wading birds. "What — are those?"

"Birds, " Ungern replied uncomfortably.

"What kind of birds?"

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"I don't know." Ungern walked toward the horse. "Look, I'm sorry about the missing days. I'll make them up, starting right now. I'll do the work of two men, I promise."

"Humph! Any day I get the work of *one* man out of a peasant will be a great surprise to me." Masaryk unslung the rifle and brought the barrel around to bear on the flock. "You get your miserable carcass out to the fields. I'm going to bag a few of these for the lord's table. He likes unusual game."

"No!" Ungern stepped into his line of fire. "You can't!"

The overseer lowered the rifle. "And why not?"

"Because they're mine and they're not for sale." Ungern glanced over his shoulder at the quietly feeding birds.

"This is Lord Kreutzwald's land, *peasant.* Everything on it belongs to him, including you!" Masaryk sighted along the rifle. "Now get out of the way."

Ungern's heart skipped a beat, then he turned and ran back toward the pond, waving his arms and shouting like a demon. The startled birds jerked their heads up from the water and eyed him nervously. "Fly!" he shouted. "Fly away and don't come back!"

They watched him for another second, then took to the sky, their necks outstretched, their great wings beating. Behind him, he heard the gun crack. One graceful flier plummeted to the ground. Ungern felt as though his heart had been torn out. "No, they're beautiful! Can't you see?"

Masaryk threw down a game bag. "Fetch that bird, idiot, and be quick about it."

Ungern stared at the leather pouch on the grass, a red haze boiling behind his eyes. He snatched a rough-edged stone from the ground and flung it with all his might at the gelding's well-brushed hindquarters.

The startled horse squealed with pain and jumped sideways. Pinning its ears back, it took the bit in its teeth and plunged recklessly toward the newly plowed fields. Ungern could hear the overseer cursing as he hauled back on the reins, fighting to regain control before it tripped in the soft furrows and broke its leg — or his neck.

His hands shaking, Ungern crossed to where the dead bird lay sprawled, half in, half out of the pond. A few of the flock had already landed again, and were dancing back and forth on their webbed feet with quick, nervous strides. He knelt and touched the body — still warm. A hot tear rolled down his cheek, and he buried his face in the bird's silken feathers.

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A moment later, he heard honking, and looked up as the flock circled anxiously above the pond. He wiped his aching eyes with the back of his hand. Somehow, *somehow*, he must send the birds away forever, because if he didn't, they would all come back — the overseer, his brothers, the villagers — with their stones and knives and guns until nothing remained of his birds but a pile of bones, bleaching in the garbage midden.

His hands clenched. He couldn't let that happen; he wouldn't! But twice now, they had been frightened away and then returned. He glanced around, the air rasping in his throat, trying to think why they always came back. His gaze stopped at the pond. His birds were water feeders; it must be the water that attracted them. If he knocked out the wooden dam built across the stream, the pond would drain and they would have to seek another feeding ground.

Ungern squinted at the sun, calculating. As soon as the overseer regained control of his horse, he would return with more of the lord's men and whip the hide off him for what he had done. He had an hour, maybe less.

He sighed and went to look for tools.

Half an hour later, he leaned on his axe and watched the water trickle through the splintered wood into the rocky bed of the small creek below. He used his sleeve to mop the sweat on his brow. The silvery water gurgled as it flowed faster and faster.

In the distance then, he heard shouting voices and the steady beat of running hooves. For a moment, he was frozen, then he swung the axe over his head and ran at the wading flock of birds, hoping to scare them away one last time. "Fly!" he shouted at them. "Go away!"

They stared at him with puzzled black eyes and dodged out of reach.

"Leave!" He threw the axe at one clump With a shocked squawk, they flapped into the air and landed on the other side of the slowly diminishing pond, safely out of reach, protesting in harsh chitters.

The hoofbeats were nearer now. There had to be ten or more horses in that group, closing fast. He felt close to tears as he watched his elegant birds dip their heads back into the muddy water. It was no use; they just weren't afraid of him.

Something hard and cool poked the middle of his back. He turned around and saw the injured bird he had kept in the cottage last night. It cocked its head and stared into his eyes as though trying to speak.

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He reached out and touched its neck with trembling fingers. Lowering its head, it pressed against him. It trusted him...loved him even.

Loved *him.*

And then he understood. They weren't staying for the pond; there were farm ponds all over this part of the country. They were staying for him, the one who had been there when they hatched, who had talked to them and cared for them, protected them, loved them. They wanted *him.*

A wild hope grew in his heart. "Come on!" He waved his arms at the birds. "Come with me!" Turning, he ran toward the dark edge of the forest, three fields away, across the newly plowed furrows that were so treacherous to a horse's delicate legs.

At first, they didn't seem to understand. Then the injured bird leapt into the air and followed him, awkwardly flapping its cut wing. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw the others staring. *Please!* he thought at them with all his might. *We can't stay here anymore! Come on!*

Then they rose into the sky and sailed after him, a great pink and white cloud, their cries strangely glad.

Sweat poured down his cheeks and his straining lungs ached for air as he raced, but there was no time to stop and catch his breath. Behind him, he heard the jingle of harness and men yelling. They must have seen him, but they would either have to leave their horses or go slowly across the plowed ground. If he could just make it to the forest, they would never find him.

Half a field lay ahead of him, a quarter. He slipped and fell face down in the soft black dirt. Spitting, he scrambled up, but now the hooves were upon him. A whip snapped and caught him full across the back. Stunned by its hot bite, he sprawled forward across the furrows. Voices laughed, loud and hearty. A shifting forest of horses' legs surrounded him.

Overhead, the flock wheeled and swooped back over the men and horses. He heard rifles crack as the pink and white birds descended, flapping and honking.

The horses squealed and shied. Ungern lurched back onto his feet and dodged between the frightened, plunging horses as their riders sawed at the reins for control. He stared in amazement; his birds were a storm of beating wings and slashing sharp-pointed beaks. The air was thick with the smell of freshly turned dirt and sweaty horses and burnt gunpowder.

Several of the landlord's men fell; some put their heels to their mounts

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and fled. Those remaining fired their rifles at the angry birds, but it was impossible to aim accurately astride the terrified horses.

Ungern put his head down and ran until he broke into the welcoming cool green shade of the trees. Behind him, the flock abandoned its attack and sailed after him into the safety of the forest.

Two days later, his birds led him to a backed-up creek bottom where long ago the trees had been flooded out, creating a shrouded, marshy depression in which they could safely rest and feed. The sunlight slanted down in broad golden rays, so intense, it seemed he could walk on it up into the sky. The air was thick with the scent of green growing things and rich black mud, and best of all, the surrounding trees were alive with an incredible assortment of birds. Ungern cobbled together a lean-to of dead-fall wood close to the cattail-choked water, and sat there, thinking, while his birds waded and fished.

For some reason, as the next several days passed, his flock became increasingly pink in sharp contrast to their black-edged feathers and bills. He watched them for hours, studying the way they stood on one leg when resting in the water, and the elegant curve of their necks as they slept with their heads tucked against their backs. No matter what anyone said, they were glorious.

In most ways, he found himself content; he had never been much of a farmer, and to his surprise, Sonya's absence was actually cheering. But even so, something was missing in the vast green silence under the towering trees — something important that he could not name.

As the long, lazy days passed, his birds grew restless and sought other feeding grounds, often leaving for more than a week at a time. He missed them, but realized it was right. They weren't babies anymore. They had their own bird-thoughts to think, their own lives to live. He had shared something special with them, but it was time to move on.

Sometimes he thought that perhaps he should travel south to where his birds might winter and no one knew him. But always, for some reason he could not name, something in his heart whispered *stay*.

Then one afternoon when he was fishing from the bank, he heard a rustle in the bushes. His heart lurched painfully as he turned around. Had the Lord Kreutzwald's men finally found him?

"So I see that you've decided to join me after all." Konstantin Pöeg scratched his nose. "About time someone finally listened. I'm half-dead as

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it is. Now look at this nightingale nest." He parted the stiffly interwoven branches of a bramble thicket and revealed a nest containing six olive-brown eggs. He picked one up and listened to it. "Ah, just right." He passed it to Ungern.

Ungern hesitantly pressed the egg to his ear; the shell was cool and smooth, silent.

The old man picked up another one and cracked it over the nest. Ungern glimpsed two small golden-brown seeds within. His breath caught in his chest.

They left the other four eggs in place. No need to be greedy, and besides, as Pöeg pointed out, people wanted more than just nightingales. There were warblers and shrikes and wagtails and swifts and...

The dazzling possibilities stretched out before Ungern as he followed the old peddler through the forest, a lifetime spent in pursuit of an infinite variety of birds. He would watch them, follow them, share their nests and their thoughts. It would be the best of all possible lives, and the most important.

Because no matter what anyone said, there was always room for more beauty in the world.

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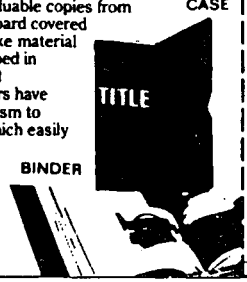

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George Alec Effinger's Maureen Birnbaum tales have appeared in this magazine since 1982. Over the years, the Barbarian Swordsperson has traveled time and space, keeping the world safe. This time, she meets with the greatest evil of them all. As George writes, "I'd always wanted to pit my resourceful Mufferoo against the eldritch, ichorous evil of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. I just hope I don't end up with tentacled abominations under my bed on account of it."

Maureen Birnbaum at the Looming Awfulness

By Elizabeth Spiegelman (As told to George Alec Effinger)

HAVE YOU EVER HAD YOUR life fall apart like a condominium of cards? I have, God knows. I know the feeling. One day I'm a happy wife and mother, married to my Josh, a successful doctor in Queens, New York. We doted on our baby son, Malachi Bret. Mums' aggravation I could keep to a minimum, and I couldn't have asked for more.

We had just about everything a young, upwardly mobile family should *have. We had two cars, both sleek, one cream and one fire-engine red. Our condo was in a predominantly non-ethnic neighborhood. We belonged to a* very *high-class health club, and we went there at least twice a month — we sat in the Jacuzzi, mostly. Josh did tennis now and then, and sometimes when I felt like it I did Richard Simmons. His* video tapes, *I mean. I had a glass-fronted cabinet* stuffed *with my favorite Mikasa china pattern in a complete service for sixteen. Josh's practice was growing so quickly that he had to take on a junior partner to handle the boring stuff.*

Life was like good.

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For a while.

One day Josh came home from his office and sat down heavily in a chair. There wasn't anything unusual in that because he always *sat down heavily. That's because he's* — heavy. *Quite a bit heavier than the slim and trim Josh I married.*

All right, I'm *heavier, too. That's why we go to the health club every few weeks. None of that is important, though. After Josh got comfortable enough, he turned to me with an embarrassed smile. "Betsy," he goes, "there's something we've got to talk about."*

Uh oh, I go. There are only a few times in your life when someone goes, "There's something we've got to talk about." One time is when a cherished friend or family member has slipped into an irreversible coma. This happens on "Days of Our Lives" all the time. *Somehow, though, I didn't think* that *was the news that Josh was waiting to tell me.*

"What is it, Josh!" I go, my voice all weak and like trembling. *There'd been a lot of changes — maybe* too *many — in my life lately. Like I'd been a militant vegetarian for a while but I was cured by a bacon chili cheeseburger with grilled onions from Bar's Mike and Grill not far from our house. And my maroon Renault had gone to car hell because no one in town would work on it, and Josh had bought me a cream '77 Fiat 124 Spider 'cause I'd* always *wanted a little European roadster. It wasn't running so well, either.*

So I was all set to hear that the condo association had raised its quarterly fee, or that Josh was being sued by someone allergic to cotton swabs, or some *damn weird thing. What Josh told me, though, I wasn't prepared for* at all.

He gave me that puny smile again and goes, "Betsy, I'm desperately in love with my receptionist, Candi Ann, and I can't live without her and I'm leaving you for her and you and Malachi Bret have four weeks to find someplace else to live."

That was the moment I knew *Mums' assessment of Josh had been right all along. He was scum or even* lower *than scum, whatever that might be.*

I smiled back at Josh and I go, "No, huh."

I've learned a little bit about being a tough, '90s kind of gal from my friend, Muffy. She, of course, was my long-ago-and-far-away best friend from high school, Maureen Danielle Birnbaum. For sure, she absolutely hates *being called Muffy these days — though she thought it was like pretty* neat *when those Andover and Exeter guys called her that. I tell her, I go, "If you*

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keep calling me Bitsy when I want to be called Elizabeth, you just got to expect the same in return." I just laid it out for her.

Actually, like the only important differences in our status is that my folks have more money *than hers, and Muffy has a* broadsword *and I don't, you know?*

So you got to let me explain about the broadsword. See, a while back, for some crazy reason I mostly fail *to believe, Muffy like transported herself spaceshipless to the Planet Mars, where she fought battles and won the undying love and respect of a* crushingly *handsome prince and his henchlings.*

Ever since, she's been trying to return to Mars and Prince Van, but although she manages to transport just fine, it's like she has no control over the destination. *It seems to make no difference, because she always ends up* someplace *exciting, and she has way rude adventures, and she always comes back here to regale and annoy me with her stories.*

Well, after Josh's lame announcement, I went over to stay with Mums and Daddy for a while. I sure *couldn't stay in the condo with my faithless former ever-loving soulmate. And I took Malachi Bret with me. He was four years old now, and he just* loved *to color in the wall space around Mums' electrical outlets. I must admit that I thought he showed a certain de Chirico flair, but the effect was totally lost on Mums.*

Anyway, *I was lying on the bed in my old room. I was watching a "Geraldo" show about how blind people are struggling to deal with the designated driver concept. For some reason I thought this was the most* tragic *thing I'd ever heard of, and I couldn't stop crying. I had a box of Kleenex by one hand and a half-pound bag of malted milk balls by the other. Mums' cat, Loathing, was asleep on my feet. Her mate, Fear, was sitting on the TV, his fluffy tail hanging down in front of Geraldo's face. Mums swears that both of them hate the anthropocentrist word "cat," and prefer to be called "feline-Americans."*

I heard a sound. It was a sort of whuffle.

"It could be Santa," I thought. I was dubious, because it was only September. I turned toward the windows, and there was Muffy, still in her goddamn gold brassiere and G-string, still toting all the spoils from her various conquests, still dragging around Old Betsy, her broadsword. It's not named after me — I should be so honored — *but because that's what Davy Crockett called his rifle.*

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"Yo, where you at, B?" she goes.

See, first she called me Bitsy, and then she called me Bits, which I hated in an ultimate *sort of way, and now it was just B. I wondered what would be next — just the Buh part, without the Ee.*

"Aw, Muffy," I go, "you practically promised *you wouldn't come back here anymore."*

She grinned her warrior-woman grin. "Fortunately, things changed miraculously, aren't you glad? And don't *call me Muffy, okay?"*

I took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "So where did you end up this *time?"*

She grinned again. "I'll give you a hint. To quote Groucho Marx in 'A Night at the Opera,' — boogie, boogie, boogie!"

You see what I mean? I cleverly hid the bag of malted milk balls under the covers. She wasn't going to get even one. *For what it's worth, here's her stirring account.*

THE MOST merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of my mind to remember things from one day to the next. I have had some startling and thrilling exploits — many more than you have recorded for the education of my audience — yet so often my adventure is made all the more arduous by what I have come to call "inappropriate forgetfulness."

In the mirror I still appear young, as young as I did when I studied at the Greenberg School; nevertheless, I sometimes wonder if I have developed an unusually premature case of Alzheimer's Disease. I get lost in jungles more easily than I care to admit, I sometimes forget the names of heroic people of both sexes, and likewise, the villains, and I'm always leaving behind just those items that would substantiate the oral history of my wonderful journeys, when I tell them to you, my dear friend, Blitzy Bitsy Spiegelman. Or Spiegelman-Fein. Or maybe it's just Spiegelman again these days. You've *got* to let me know which you want me to use.

I have just returned from an exploit filled with occult evil, wizardry, and terror beyond imagining. Alas, I — and one other — alone remain to tell the tale, and once more, alas, I have nothing to support my words but a bit of charred rope which I could have obtained anywhere.

Bitsy, have you *noticed* that my narrative style has become like, you

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know, dated, clumsy, and ornate? That I'm not talking in the airy colloquial phrases for which I'm justly celebrated? That is one of the insidious effects of my brush with...the *horror*. For now, that's the only way I can refer to it. I dare not name it until I have made the setting clear. Later you will know all, and you will wish that you did not. It will be my fault if your dreams are troubled for weeks and months to come, but I know how *eagerly* you look forward to these recitations of my courageous endeavors.

It all began in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University, like the largest open-stack library in the Free World. I saw your eyes open wider when I mentioned the college. I suppose as old as you get, you never lose the certainty that New Haven, Connecticut and Yale University are pretty much *Heaven* as far as we Greenberg School girls were concerned. Harvard was too stuffy, Princeton too rural, but *Yale* — and those gallant Yalies! — was what our education and training had prepared us for. We were to go forth and charm a Yalie into marriage; or else, if we failed, we tried to be satisfied with entering matrimony with, oh, like a *family practitioner*, as you did.

Be that as it may, in my final (and I do mean like *final*) attempt to reach the boffable Prince Van on Mars, I stretched myself out toward Mars; instead, I hit that library in that university on the north shore of Long Island Sound. I realized that I was on Earth immediately, of course; I've had *other* exploits on Earth, but they've all been with mythical figures or in historical times. Now, however, I had dropped into the Sterling Memorial Library, and a newspaper there informed me that it was March 1, 1966.

I worried for a moment. I had *whooshed*, all right, but I hadn't whooshed very far in either time or space. This had been happening pretty often lately. The next time I whoosh, who knows but I may end up only an hour in the past, standing in my magnificent Amazonian regalia in Rabbi and Mrs. Gold's bedroom four houses down the block.

Did this mean that my career as the premier female swordsperson and all-around savior of men and women in distress had come to an *end*? Was I like *stuck* here, in the recent past in New Haven, forever? Well, it could have been worse. I could have journeyed back to Mars and discovered that Prince Van broke our dates all the time and never called the next day. He might have been interested in One Thing and One Thing only, something I wouldn't like give up easily even to him. He might have wanted the two of us to go live with his *mother*, the queen, for God's sake.

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I guess that as the years passed, and as my failures to return to Mars became embarrassingly numerous, my once-vivid memories of the glorious Prince Van began to fade. Also, I'd begun to suspect that the handsome prince didn't *want* to be found, and that I'd been put on some kind of interplanetary *Hold* or something.

Further, I might mention, I'd met another young man early in my adventures, a stalwart and courageous person of great intellect and daring. I was to meet him again during this shocking and unspeakable experience, although I did not know it when I first arrived, dressed in my fighting harness of skimpy leather and strands and strings of gold and jewels. I still wore my battle sword, Old Betsy, in her scabbard at my side, and my tangled hair and grim, warrior-woman expression left me pretty much out of place in the cool and quiet precincts of the Sterling Memorial Library.

In *fact*, security personnel were already hurrying toward me, either to like slaughter me where I stood or, at the very least, to eject me forcibly from the premises. As a fighting woman proud of her accomplishments and possessing superior combat skills, agility, and strength, I welcomed the challenge. It was only later that I realized that I'm *always* causing unnecessary uproar when I might fare better without making a scene at all.

This time, as usual, I *did* make a scene. Old Betsy sang as I whanged her from her scabbard. Immediately, all the security guards stopped in their tracks and pulled out their LFRs. LFRs are Little Radios; I don't need to tell you what the F word is, because it's *the* F word, and I just don't use language like that. People tell me that they're impressed that I can whoosh around the universe and have strange encounters all the time and *still* remain the sweet and innocent young lady I was years ago at the Greenberg School.

Discretion, as I've come to know, is somewhere between 56% and 64% of valor. I responded in my new and highly regarded mature manner, and reassured the armed guards that I Meant Them No Harm. "There, there," I go, smiling and patting the air soothingly and behaving almost *completely* in a non-threatening way. Then I simply turned my back on the uniformed security personnel and made my way outdoors and into the late winter sunlight.

All right, I'd escaped from the world-renowned library, but my costume didn't work very well on the Old Campus, either. Especially in New Haven during this ancient era when even Carnaby Street was just too far-out for all of America northeast of Times Square. Remember that reaction you got from

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Miss Schildkraut, *Silas Marner* and Ninth Grade English, when you bought that *too-grotty-for-words* transparent plastic handbag? She was sure you were listening to drug-crazed moptop music and smoking banana peels *yourself*, too.

I had one immediate priority: a nice outfit from Ann Taylor Sportswear on Chapel Street, hard by the notorious Hotel Taft where many of our *consoeurs* have been overcome by passion and gin. I was thinking of a pale green, button-down collar shirtdress that I could wear through the spring, a pair of matching Jacques Cohen espadrilles, a Provençal print handbag from Pierre Deux, and like whatever accessories happened to catch my eye.

If the saleshuman who served me thought the ready-to-rumble costume I wore into the shop was even the *least* bit bizarre, she hid it well — particularly when I took out the largish stash of cash I kept hidden in its sanctum in the left cup of my golden bra. I'd sold some gold and jewels after the last time I saw you, and I was going to need the folding money. My stepmother Pammy's gold card, which was in my *right* cup, wouldn't do me any good in 1966. I don't know if they even had *BankAmericards* back then.

Good old Pammy, I thought, how long it had been since I'd *seen* her. Oh my *Gawd*, Bitsy, I just thought that she probably still hasn't finished paying off my shopping duel with that hard-bitten bitch, Maid Marian.

I could only hope that my family was proud of me.

Well, I was now clothed appropriately for New Haven — or I *thought* I was, until I stepped out into the in-like-a-lion March wind. It was pretty damn *cold*, Bitsy. Whatever my exploit was going to be, I was just about certain that I could use a good Republican cloth coat. Not that I'm necessarily a Republican — I am chiefly nonpartisan in my politics, preferring to remain available to come to the aid of *anyone* in need regardless of race, ethnic origin, religion, or creed. It's just that here I was, back in 1966, and like Nixon wasn't even President yet, but he reminded me of that cloth coat comment and how he wouldn't give the goddamn *dog* back. History was really redundant the second time around.

I decided to book it over to the Yale Co-op, like totally *forgetting* that I was stuck temporarily in the dim, dark ages before Yale admitted female undergraduates, and the selection of women's merchandise was going to be minimal at best. Nevertheless, I got myself a mildly wildly colored ski jacket that I'd just *have* to be satisfied with and a sterling silver circle pin, which I'd forgotten to buy for my shirtdress at Ann Taylor's.

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Then, *it* happened.

What *was* it, I hear you go in your shocked and like breathless voice. Yes, it was eerie and dreadful in the most *total* extreme, a nightmarish confrontation that made my blood run as cold as that time when I thought I'd gotten, *you know*, PG from French-kissing that crispo dude from Waite Hoyt Junior High. Sure, Bitsy, now you can look back on *that* and laugh, but what I witnessed in the Yale Co-op near the vinyl record section was too demented and ichorous and fiendish to ever pry a giggle from me.

It was that *guy*, that Rod Marquand.

Now don't go all ignorant on me. You remember him *very* well. He was the one who appeared suddenly while I was being held captive by that talking ape-monster, Yag-Nash. Rod had that submarine sort of thing that traveled through solid rock. His problem was that he was more interested in like fighting *crime* than in wrestling with *me*, and I guess I stormed out of his company in a well-rehearsed huff.

So, the question immediately presents itself for asking, what was Rod Marquand, boy-inventor extraordinaire, doing at the Yale Co-op *twenty full years* before our encounter at the center of the Earth, *and looking exactly the same as he had then?*

You see, there were only two possible answers. The first was that he drank the blood of innocent virgins to maintain his hideous and dreadful youth — but that was like scarcely possible, because he'd never made *move one* toward any of my arteries, and you know I'd given him plenty of opportunities.

The second answer was that he was immortal and ageless, as I myself seem to be. That was *another* reason that like screamed that Rod Marquand and I were perfect for each other, made for each other as few other couples have been through the whole sad parade of history.

Yet this Rod was like twenty years *younger* than the one I'd known during the Yag-Nash episode. He would be meeting me as if for the first time. That didn't tell me why he didn't recognize me at the Earth's core, twenty years later. I went to Dr. Bertram A. Waters of the Yale University of Plasmonics Department for help in understanding what had happened. He gave me like this completely murky explanation. Here it is, as best as I can recall it:

"My dear Miss Birnbaum — " he goes.

I go — believe me — "I'm not your *dear* anything, pal."

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He got this look on his face like someone had slipped the head of a banana slug into his bag of malted milk balls. See, Bitsy, I *know* you got them there under the covers. He goes, "I doubt if I'm your 'pal,' either, but I suppose it's just a figure of speech. In any event, Maureen — may I call you Maureen?"

"If you must," I go, wishing that he'd like just get on with it.

"How does one understand time? There are various ways of imagining it. And yes, time is mostly imaginary. Of course, events happen and they must have some matrix to happen in, if you follow me. One instant the electron is all excited, and the next instant it's emitted its photon and gone home." I swear, Bitsy, the guy leered at me. Take it from me, sweetie, Mo *knows* leering for sure.

And don't *ever* call me "Mo."

Dr. Waters told me that he thought of time — everyone's personal timeline — as a string that stretches from Point A to Point Z. Now, if sometime somebody figures out how to travel *back* in time, the string goes from Point A to, say, Point L, loops back to Point G, maybe, then turns back through Point L — *in a different place* — and on again to Point Z. So if you meet a guy at Point G who is or will be a time-traveler, there's no telling if this is like his first or second pass through that moment. And there can be any number of trips into the past by the same chrononaut, looping again and again at Point G or any other point. Trust me on this, Bitsy, 'cause I took the trouble to consult experts.

No? Well, never mind, because I mean Dr. Waters wasn't completely sold on his own theory, and neither was I.

BTW — that's "by the way," by the way — I described what I'd seen in the Yale Co-op a bunch of ways, including ichorous. I may have exaggerated *un petit peu*, but Rod Marquand is on the far side of ichorous, and I should know.

Suddenly, when I saw him standing there, I wondered how I was going to meet him. I understood without even really thinking about it that it wasn't just a coincidence — Rod was here and we were going to have an exploit together, like before at the center of the Earth, only this time would technically be the first.

So I grabbed the nearest object — it happened to be the Beatles' newly released album *Rubber Soul* — and I walked right up to him. My God, Bitsy, you *know* I've never been shy around boys. I think it's one of the things they admire most about me. That and my broadsword.

Well, I go, "Have you heard this album yet?"

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Rod blinked at me — oh, he was T.C.T.L.! Too cute to live, honey, just try to stay with me — and he goes, "It's their best so far, I think. It's fab and groovy."

I smiled a little at his antique slang; on him it was like *real, real* sweet. I go, "I've heard some of it on the radio. What do you think 'Norwegian Wood' really means?"

"It could be a code, you know," Rod goes. "An encryption of some enigmatic message known only to the Beatles themselves and their innermost circle."

I sighed. "I wish *I* could be in that circle. I wish *I* could be Jane Asher." I remembered that in 1966 I had a crush on Paul, the cute one.

"Well," goes Rod, "their music is really neat, but at the moment there are more important things competing for my time and attention." As buf and tuf as Rod Marquand is, he's more of a party *vegetable*, if you get my drift. Sometimes I think he'd have to ask a girl to give him lessons before he could even be a *wallflower*.

"I'd like to know what those things are," I go, smiling my never-miss dreamy smile, Number Five at 75% power.

"If I'm not being too forward," Rod goes, completely conquered, "I'd like to invite you to have dinner with me at my residential college."

"What college are you in?"

"Branford," he goes, with an unspoken "of course" appended at the end.

It wasn't like a very *long* walk from the Co-op to the High Street entrance to Branford College, but I *mean*! The wind had picked up and now rain mixed with sleet had begun falling. I was damn glad I'd had the foresightfulness to buy the ski jacket. Rod put his hand under my elbow, evidently believing he was doing the yo-ho *manly* thing and helping me walk on the slippery pavement.

I simply shrugged away and smiled prettily and I go, "I'm so sure I can walk just fine by myself, thanks. Like I've only been *doing* this since I was a baby and everything."

He got a wounded puppy look on his face and maybe it was good for him. I told myself that I couldn't really expect a 90s kind of guy in 1966, but then I decided that it was never too soon to put somebody in touch with his real self.

We passed through the ironwork gate of Branford College, beneath the vasty, shadowed heights of Harkness Tower and The World's Most Illegible Clock. It was dinner time and I was *ravenous*. I hadn't eaten since twenty-seven years in the future.

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"It looks like salisbury steak and two veg," Rod goes.

"Oh, we have that all the time at the Greenberg School," I go.

He smiled down at me and goes, "Not the way they make it here. We've got Jonathan Edwards' own recipe."

"Jonathan Edwards?" I thought he might have been a disk jockey on WABC-AM in the mid-60s.

"'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' *That* Jonathan Edwards. There's another residential college named after him across the way."

Like *nothing* makes salisbury steak, two veg, and chocolate milk go down better than contemplating "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." I remembered something about spiders dangling on thin strands of web above the hellfire.

The evening proceeded to get ever more weird and romantic from that point on.

We'd finished eating and Rod put one hand on mine. He gazed into my eyes and goes, "Want some dessert?"

"I've told you that I'm a warrior-woman," I go. We'd gone through all that during the walk from the Co-op. I'd unwrapped Old Betsy and given him a hot look at my auric underwear. "I have to guard constantly against putting on weight, but I suppose a serving of bread pudding and some more chocolate milk wouldn't hurt me *too* much."

"Bread pudding?" Rod goes. "Why, that's my favorite dessert!" We just had *so much* in common.

That led to a discussion of the codification of all types of bread pudding, according to the official Ivy League definition. The chart looked something like this:

	YES	NO
Hot		
Cold		
Whiskey Sauce		
Rum Sauce		
Firm		
Fluffy		
With Raisins		
Without Raisins		

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In 1966, the sixteen possible combinations like totally described bread pudding as science understood it at that point in time. Today, of course, with high-speed computers and the other miracles given to us by the space program, there are bread pudding types that were unimaginable during the Lyndon Johnson administration. For example, the best bread pudding I've ever had is served in the Palace Café on Canal Street in New Orleans, and it comes with a fantastic white chocolate sauce. In the 60s, such a thing would've been as illegal as beans in chili.

We found ourselves holding hands as we went back through the Branford cafeteria line. We each got a serving of bread pudding (hot, rum, fluffy, with raisins, and extremely good). When we returned to our table, Rod goes, "Hello! What's this?"

It was a page of photocopy paper, the strange, stark copies they turned out in the early days of the industry.

I tried to read the writing on the page, but it was in some strange occult language. There were nightmarish drawings of nameless, hideous, tentacled creatures. I shuddered and gave the paper back to Rod.

He stared at the writing for a few moments, and then began to murmur, "Dead is not that which can through ages lie, to see in fell times how even death may die."

Gave me the shivering *creeps*, know what I mean, Bitsy? Not so my Hot Rod. He just shook his head. "Somebody's been playing some twisted joke on me lately, Maureen," he goes. "This isn't the first time I've gotten a copy of what the prankster wants me to think is some demented, malevolent manuscript."

"You can read it, though?" I go. I pretended to show interest in Rod's hobbies, because Miss Kanon, the gym teacher, always told us that would make us popular with the boys. It always worked for me.

"Yes," Rod goes, "it's an old dialect of Arabic. I studied it one summer when my uncle, Dr. Zach Marquand, took me to Egypt to help me solve the Mystery of the Dismembered Murderers."

"And you think someone is sending you joke messages in an obscure, ancient dialect? *Why?*"

Rod's adorable face suddenly went like all *serious*, you know? "I can't say for sure. The first was just a scrap, with the words *Cthulhu fhtagn* written on it. This 'Cthulhu' has been mentioned again and again. I don't know what it means."

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I shuddered, even in the bright warmth of the Branford dining hall. "Cthulhu fhtagn," I go, all thoughtful. "It sounds *Gaelic* to me, not Arabic."

"It's neither," Rod goes.

"Maybe," I go, shivering again, "maybe it's the long-dead language of those scaly, unclean squid-headed creatures."

Rod didn't even respond to that notion. "Then there were all the references to the Sunken City of R'lyeh, and some blasphemous, horrible fertility goddess called Shub-Niggurath. And pages and pages of drawings and scraps of incomprehensible poetry and...*warnings*."

I'll confess, Bitsy, my stomach started to hurt. "Listen, Rod," I go, "why don't we forget about Cthulhu tonight and just go see Michael Caine in *Alfie*. It's showing at the College for a buck and a half."

"Yes," he goes, folding the photocopy paper and tucking it into an inside pocket of his sport coat. "I'm not going to let some minor-league mentality get the better of me. I'm just going to ignore the entire business."

"Fine," I go. "Let's boogie."

"Let's...what?"

I stood up and he got up, too. "I'll let you carry my broadsword. I never let just *anybody* do that, you know."

We had a nice time at the movie, although Michael Caine's character was like this *pig*. Afterward, we went someplace for a light supper, and Rod installed me in the Hotel Taft. I shuddered alone in my bed, imagining that I could hear the helpless shrieks of my overpowered sisters as they were assaulted by tentacled fiends from R'lyeh wearing blue J. Press blazers and gray slacks.

I had fallen fast asleep, and *believe* me, Bitsy, my dreams were populated by obscene monsters that spoke in a Cockney accent. When my phone rang, I sat upright, terrified. I didn't know where I was or what time it was or *anything*. I answered the phone, sure that I was going to hear nothing but whistling, blubbery monster noises.

Instead, Rod goes, "Maureen? I hope I didn't wake you up."

It was one-thirty in the morning. "No, don't worry about it. I was just like sleeping."

"Good. Now, listen closely. When I returned to my rooms, I discovered several strange and ominous signs. First, my roommate, Sandy, was nowhere to be found. You have to understand that Sandy is terribly incompetent

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socially, and he usually retires to his bedroom shortly after dinner. It's entirely unlike him to be out so late."

I wasn't as upset about it as Rod was, but after all, I didn't know Sandy. "Maybe he's fallen in love with a forgiving townie woman," I go. "Or maybe he just really needed a burger or something."

Rod ignored my simple explanations. "Further," he goes, "the casement windows were forced open *from the inside.* Upon closer inspection, I found traces of a horrible, foul-smelling slime on the window sill, and it was dripping and oozing down the outside wall to the ground."

"Slime," I go in a flat voice. I just *knew* we were going to run into slime somewhere along the way. Greenberg School girls are, as you know, Bitsy, antipathetic toward slime in general.

"The last dreadful clue was that the trail of slime led right to Harkness Tower. The door had been burst open, and as I entered and looked up the stairwell that led to the clocktower and carillon, I noted a diffuse and flickering greenish light descending from the highest level."

"Calm down, Rod," I go. "Now tell me why you called *me* about all this."

"Well, Maureen," he goes — and I could tell that he was like *way* embarrassed — "I am inclined to take those notes, drawings, and warnings more seriously. My theory is that one of those eldritch evils abducted Sandy with foul intent, and has dragged him to the top of Harkness Tower. I called you because — "

" — because *I'm* the one with the broadsword," I go. "Okay, I'll get dressed and be right there."

Immediately I had like this gross image problem: The proper costume to accompany Old Betsy was the metallic bra and G-string, of course. We're talking New England winter, though, and if I got into my familiar barbarian drag, I'd freeze my *tush* off. And the alternative — wearing the Ann Taylor shirtdress with the broadsword — was too ludicrous even to *consider.*

I compromised. I wore the leather harness and gold bikini, and zipped up the ski jacket over them. I hefted Old Betsy, made sure I had my hotel key and bus fare, and headed out fearlessly into the night.

By the time I got to Branford and the entrance to the chapel in the base of Harkness Tower, my legs had goosebumps the size of loquats, I'm telling you. My Rod was waiting for me. He rushed to me and enclosed me in his arms. "Don't be afraid, my dear," he goes. "I've picked up some spells along

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the way that I'm confident will protect us against most of the perverse beings we may meet up there."

"*Most*?" I go. I shuddered. I really wished he hadn't said "most."

"If you guard my back," he goes, "I'll lead the way." He was so brave! Finally here was a man I could *respect*.

I also wasn't crazy about his use of the word "spells." He was introducing at this late date a severely *fantastic* element into what had been — except for the Saint Graal business, which was no doubt just the nightmare effect of a late-night pizza or something — *clearly* a super-scientific series of adventures. I explained my objection to Rod.

"I'm dead certain that there's a super-scientific explanation to *this*, too," he goes. "We just have to find out what it is. Come on, now."

I wasn't crazy about his use of the term "*dead* certain," while we're at it.

"I've got a flashlight, Maureen," Rod goes bravely. "A lot of predatory animals *flee* bright light."

"Oh yeah," I go. "How many slime-trailing, sleepless, slimy, slobbering things do you know that will *run and hide* from your Eveready?"

"Okay," he goes, "you've put your finger on the major difficulty of our expedition here. We're up against the unknown, and we can't predict how successful our conventional fighting techniques will be. It may be that my spells and your broadsword ability will avail us naught against the poisonous entities from beyond the stars. But I ask you, what *else* can we do?"

I didn't hesitate long, let me tell you. "We could wait for help in the morning. We could consult more learned authorities on campus — and *surely* there are a few paraphysicists who could help us. We could give your roommate up for lost and go have *breakfast* in a short while. We could hope that Cthulhu or whoever is intruding on our peace might just decide to look around and go home. There are *any* number of other courses of action beside *going up this spiral stairwell.*"

"Let's climb, anyway," Rod goes. "There isn't much other choice."

"As long as *you'll* take the first attack from beyond the stars. That will give me time to scramble back down the stairs. Just *kidding*, of course."

We did climb nearer and nearer the carillon bells, and nothing more disturbing interrupted us for a time. After a while, however, the carillon began to sway a bit in the non-existent breeze, clapping together and making strange, unearthly, *ancient-sounding* bell melodies. At the same time, I

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noticed that pulsating, poisonous patterns were written out on the stone walls in nacreous, glowing runes that neither Rod nor I could identify, as well as terrible, twisting pictographs that moved of their own accord. They writhed before us, and we had no way of knowing how to interpret them.

There were overwhelmingly strong hints of monsters, of gods or creatures from beyond our time and space. I wondered how we could *possibly* understand them — and if we couldn't understand them, then how could we battle them? Were we *doomed* to become slaves to their will?

No. I'll let you know that right *up front*, Bitsy. At this point in the investigation, the manifold forms of The Great Old Ones did *not* possess us. We had a means of escape. Let me tell you about it.

Rod had apparently studied many of the subtexts that dealt with the rites of The Great Old Ones, as well as others that involved the Outer Gods and other alien races and monsters.

There *were*, unfortunately, many, many classes of ancient, unknown, inhuman, mind-numbing gods. The one encountered by me and good old Rod was called a Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath. Though less formidable than some of the other Outer Gods, it still appeared in a *horrible, unspeakable, repellent* form.

It was a gigantic, grasping thing, a hideous animated "tree" with poisonous tentacles for branches; the tentacles ended in black hooves, and the creature could shamble clumsily across the ground. It had many puckered mouths, each dripping the same gruesome green slime we'd seen in Rod's Branford suite. The Dark Young reeked like an opened grave, and it towered over us some fifteen feet tall. I'll tell you at once, dear, it was certainly not *pleasant* in any respect.

Rod was prepared, however; he knew a brief cantrip that freed us from the horror of the Dark Young. I didn't understand a *word* of the spell, as it was spoken in some lost language that delighted in words ending in — vowel-t-h and other vocabulary that was so guttural that you could get gall stones just *listening* to it. My Greenberg School dabbling into European dialects was hardly enough to keep me informed of what was happening.

Anyway, the Dark Young seemed to freeze. It became absolutely motionless, and then began to shrink. To me, it looked like it was disappearing down a dark, featureless tunnel. We didn't wait around long enough to see what would happen next. "Follow me, sweetheart," I cried, and I led the way

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down the staircase and out of the tower. You must know by now that I have no problem being decisive and, anyway, I didn't want that green goo all over my trusty broadsword.

I realized that I'd been holding my breath, and it was good to inhale deeply in the fresh, cold air of the Branford courtyard. "I'll see you back to the Taft," Rod goes. "First thing in the morning, we'll pay a call on the Sterling Library. I believe they have some texts that will help understand what's happening here."

I nodded. Of course, I yearned to get into battle, but I was also wise enough to realize that we had some homework to take care of first. "What about Sandy, your roommate?" I go.

Rod rubbed his strong, square chin. "I think Sandy is the prisoner of some greater, more grotesque evil. The Dark Young was there merely to stall us, or to frighten us into giving up the chase."

"Fear?" I go, laughing. "It's not even in my primary word-list. I'll meet you here at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. I want to get myself a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and some good sneakers. I don't want to go up against the Vast Unclean from Dimension X in an Ann Taylor shirtdress."

"Whatever you say, Maureen," he goes. "The forces of the profane will be patient."

That made me shudder despite myself.

Time passes. That's a *quote*, by the way, Bitsy, and a Snickers bar if you can tell me where it comes from. Give up? Dylan Thomas, *you* remember. Time passes. It's morning, I bopped by the Co-op again and got myself some horrible new stiff blue jeans, a blue sweatshirt with "Yale University" printed in teeny tiny letters — reverse ostentation, I called it — and some canvas gym shoes. This was in the Nouveau Stone Age before Reeboks, you know. I'm wearing the ski jacket and carrying the shirtdress in a bag with Old Betsy. I was ready to *get down*. As it were.

Well, I trudged back to High Street and Branford College. I have to admit that I suppressed another shudder as I passed beneath Harkness Tower, but it was daytime now and bright and warm under the sun, and the Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath might have been just some black-and-white monster from a movie somewhere between Godzilla and Mothra.

Hey, did you ever wonder how, when a new monster appears in Japan, the people immediately know its *name*? I figured it out. They have a list, like

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with hurricanes. A new monster gets the next name on the list. The giant turtle appears and everybody goes, "*Ohhh*, Gammera the Invincible!" It's simple if you understand the Asian point of view. Well, of *course* I do, what do you know about it?

Rod was waiting for me in the courtyard, fidgeting a little. "Good morning, Maureen," he goes. He like gave me a chaste, heroic kiss on the cheek. Jeez, he was almost perfect!

"Let's do it," I go. My voice was deep and rumbly. I was fully in my fighting-woman persona again.

We walked to the Sterling Memorial Library. This time when I went in, no one made a fuss. I looked like Suzy Co-Ed, even though, as I've mentioned, Yale hadn't yet got its act together about that. Maybe the librarians and security guards all believed I was some Smith or Bennington talent down for a few days.

Rod murmured to me, "The texts we need to consult are in a special section, the Omega Collection. They're generally not available to the public, but I'm a good friend of the curator. I've used that material before, and I'll explain to Dr. Christenson that this is an emergency. He'll understand."

About a quarter of an hour later, a very old, very fragile book came down a dumbwaiter for us. It was so ancient, it could've been like the first rough draft of the Old Testament, you know? Rod treated it with caution and great respect, and carried it over to a table where we could browse through its mystic text.

"This is an English translation of the *Necronomicon*," Rod goes, "hand-copied from Dr. John Dee's original manuscript sometime in the last two or three centuries. It is extremely rare, and literally priceless in value. It's a very great honor to be allowed to view this book."

"Well," I go, "*I'm* suitably impressed."

"This is also the source of the photocopied drawings and inscriptions that I've received," he goes. He turned a few pages. "Hello! What's this?"

Another photocopy had been inserted between two of the book's crumbling pages. It said, "R.M." — that must have stood for "Rod Marquand," I guessed — and then some numbers. "What does it mean?" I go.

"If I'm correct, this is a certain longitude and latitude. We'll need to consult an accurate atlas next."

"Is it a warning?" I go. "Or a *challenge*?"

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Rod gazed at me steadily. "Perhaps both," he goes. He didn't show the least hint of fear.

A few minutes later, we'd established the location indicated on the photocopy. The city of New Haven, Connecticut is hemmed in by two large ridges, West Rock and East Rock. Both are easily climbed, with roads twisting back and forth from their bases to their summits. They make for pleasant hiking in the spring and fall.

The intersection of longitude and latitude fell right at the topmost point of East Rock. "There," Rod goes, stabbing his finger down on the map, "*that's* where we'll find *It*. And, I hope, my roommate, Sandy."

Rod had a bicycle and he borrowed another for me, and together we pedaled toward our grim destination. I was completely lost, because I didn't know New Haven very well beyond the immediate environs of the university. It was too early in the season for the journey to be picturesque. No flowers bloomed, and the oaks and elms loomed above us naked and black in their leaflessness.

It was good warrior-woman exercise, though, and I could feel the burn in my mighty thews as I pushed the Italian ten-speed up the long slope of East Rock. I've found that just as everyone in the universe *miraculously* speaks English, and that I *miraculously* never seem to age, also *miraculously* I rarely put on too much weight. Oh, there'll be a pound or two now and then around the holidays or after some wanton barbarian feast, but my active life has toned me up much better than your exclusive health club seems to have done for you. No offense, Bitsy, of *course* I'm not being catty.

"Look, there !" Rod goes. He was like freaking out on me.

I stared where he was pointing, and I couldn't see a goddamn *thing*. He dragged his bike across the road, and I followed. When I got closer, I saw why he was so excited. He'd discovered a small crack in the rock that proved to be the entrance to a noxious, noisome, unspeakable cavern.

Lord only knows how many thousands of people had passed right by that place, but it took the eagle eye of Rod Marquand to spot the significant opening. I knew there was nothing in the Yale student guide to New Haven about noxious, noisome, unspeakable caves. Unspeakable rival schools, maybe, but nothing about caves.

"We're getting close," he goes."I can feel it."

It was dark, and there were webby things hanging down in my face. "It

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sure is unspeakable in here," I go. "Indescribable, too."

"Don't talk, Maureen," he goes. "Save your energy for *It*."

"What is this *It* we're going to be going up against?" I go. "Can you give me an idea?"

Rod's voice came from further into the cavern, whose floor had begun to slope upward. "Perhaps Great Cthulhu himself. There's no way of knowing. I hope you have a tight grasp on your sanity."

"I've got a tight grasp on Old Betsy," I go. "She's always been enough for me so far."

"You've never been confronted by one of the Slobbering Obscene before."

"Except last night," I go, reminding him. He did not answer. That bothered me, too.

I could not see Rod, so I trudged along behind him. It had become stiflingly warm inside the cave, and I unzipped the ski jacket. I wanted to drop the jacket altogether, because I could better wield my sword without it, but I thought, "*Hey*. What if we run into the Ice Abomination from the Moons of Pluto?" *Better safe than sorry* is the motto of our wing of the Birnbaum clan, you know.

Ahead of me I heard Rod go "Courane? Is that you?" There was an awful moment of silence, and then he goes, "My God, Sandy! What's *happened* to you?"

I go, "*Oh boy*, here we go. Get yourself ready for Interstellar Pudding Monsters."

In a marvelous testimony to my innate courage and like sheer, overwhelming *gutsiness*, I did not hesitate. I hurried along until I beheld the excruciating, festering creature that Rod's friend had become.

"It must have been the contact with the Great Old Ones," Rod goes in a frantic, fearful voice.

Sandy had become a gnarled, aged man, lurching and clutching blindly in the flickering greenish glow emanating from some sort of well in the midst of the cavern. His hair had turned white and most of it had kind of fallen out, you know? And he drooled a weird substance that was truly, truly *ichorous*. He could barely be called human anymore, and if it were up to me, I *wouldn't* have. Yet, after all, he was still in some way connected to his elder self — Rod's companion and roommate.

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"I can't stand it!" Rod goes. "Maureen, beware! That which caused this change in Courane lies nearby, and you risk the soundness of your mind should you chance to make contact with it!" I thought Rod's speech had taken a sharp turn into the *melodramatic*, but I didn't say anything about that.

Around Sandy floated odd shapes — illusions, lesser monsters, or thought-projected weapons I could not tell. They looked like...well, apart from being indescribable, they looked like drab-colored, hovering paisleys.

"*Paisleys*, Rod!" I go. "Sandy is trying to tell us something!"

"Tell us something? *How*? And what is he trying to say?"

"I don't *know*!" I go. Like I was putting most of my attention on what had once been your average college student. I didn't want to hurt Sandy, but I knew that I might have to, in order to like save our lives. I concentrated my attack on the paisleys. There were red paisleys, blue ones, and green ones. That cavern looked like an explosion in the Land's End tie factory.

I learned very quickly that when I whacked a floating paisley, it became *two* small floating paisleys. Something told me that it would be like ever so harmful to let one of them touch us. I backed away a little more. The Sandy-creature took a step forward, and the paisleys advanced with him.

"Be careful!" Rod goes helpfully. "He's trying to cut us off from the way out!"

I'd already noticed that, but then, of course, I'm a fierce fighting-person, well-schooled in hand-to-hand combat, and therefore much better informed than Rod in such warlike mysteries as strategy and tactics. Instead of slashing at the nearest paisley, I just poked it a little. Just to see what happened.

It exploded. Into about a thousand micro-paisleys. "Jeez," I go. I was starting to be troubled.

"He's *humming*!" Rod goes, all excited. "He's humming some spell!"

"What is it? What's it mean? You got a counter-spell?"

I couldn't see Rod, but his voice was sad. "No," he goes. "Unfortunately, it's in the one Aramaic dialect I neglected in my studies. Wouldn't you just know it?"

"Great," I muttered through my clenched teeth.

Onward Sandy came. Further back the floating paisleys pressed us. I could feel the low wall of the gruesome well against my legs. Rod and I retreated further. "*Help me, Rod!*" I go.

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At about this very moment, Rod decided he'd had enough, and he de-invited himself from the remainder of this confrontation. I did not hold it against the dear young man. This may have been his first meeting with such an onslaught of demonic activity, and he did not have either the experience or the fierce determination that I had.

Further into the gloom we stumbled. I felt a single moment of despair, and then *suddenly* I knew just what to do, as usual. I understood that I had to capture Courane's attention, and I had to appeal to the small crumb of human intelligence that still remained to him, unsullied by the dire alien influences.

"Sandy," I go, "*paisley!* Think paisley! I know what you're trying to tell us. If you concentrate, I know I can pull you out of this horrible mind-control."

"Yeah?" goes Rod.

I ignored him for the moment. "Sandy, think about your paisley ties! Think Ivy League, think crocodiles, think Lacoste shirts! Think Branford! Above all, think *Yale*!"

Courane roared and staggered back. He brought his twisted, knotted hands to his face, and he fell to one knee.

"I think you're on the right track, Maureen," goes Rod.

"You bet." I swung Old Betsy low, and she whanged off the fetid stone of the glowing green well. Sandy's eyes opened a little wider, and he crawled back another short distance.

"Remember the Clock at the Biltmore!" It still existed in this time, I knew. "Think *L.L. Bean*, Sandy! And will Great Cthulhu supply you with gin and tonics? I think *not*!" He was on both knees now, clawing at me either in supplication or in a fevered, fiendish attempt to rip open my throat. I wish you'd seen me, Bitsy. I was like *stupendous*.

"You think you'll get into a super-secret senior society like Skull and Bones like this, Sandy?" I go. Well, maybe he could.

Finally, unable to withstand the fury of my psychological attack any longer, he scrambled to his feet, uttered a long, ululating, despairing cry, and hurled himself over the brink of the demonically gleaming well. I heard his shriek echo from the walls for what seemed many minutes. With his last ounce of humanity, Sandy had sacrificed himself for us.

Then there was like this *silence*, okay?

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The floating paisleys had disappeared. The sense of foreboding gave way to, well, boding. The permeating atmosphere of absolute evil lifted. Rod got to his feet, shaking his head. "What...what happened?" he goes.

I took him by the hand. "Come along, dear," I go. "We have a long bike ride home."

And that, pretty simply, is how I overcame the worst that the ancient, amorphous, deathless, eldritch, gibbering gods of Elsewhere and Elsewhen threw at me. I guess I'm just too solidly centered in Real Life to be driven crazy by a bulbous and mouldering octopoid. I figured I chased them all back to Massachusetts, where they belonged.

"So," she goes, "what do you think?"

"What do I think?" I go. "I think my life is over. I think my husband has left me for his receptionist, I think my baby son doesn't have a father anymore, I think I may have to move in with Mums and Daddy practically forever, and I think I don't give a good goddamn *what you do with your sword."*

Muffy just stared at me for a moment. "Do you mean *it?" she goes.*

"Yeah, I mean it."

"I mean, like you've been testy before, God knows, but I could always count on you, Bitsy."

"Elizabeth, please. Call me Elizabeth."

Muffy looked like a shelf of books had dumped on her head. "You'll get over it," she goes. "Sure, you will."

I dabbed at my nose with a tissue. "Go haunt somebody else for a while," I go.

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "I'm going to go find Rod Marquand and we're going to continue our everlasting romance, and we're going to get married and be happy forever, and I'm going to want you to be my matron of honor, so you've got to get over this depression, Bitsy. C'mon, just cheer up!"

I almost threw a shoe at her, except I didn't have *a shoe. She blew me a kiss, walked out of my bedroom, and I haven't seen or heard from her since.*

Thank you, Lord.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE BIG WHAM

IN MID-JULY of 1994, Jupiter's fireworks upstaged our 25th anniversary celebrations of the Apollo moon landing. While aging astronauts exchanged toasts, fragments of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 slammed into the giant planet. Only two years ago we did not even know this comet existed. In July, it triggered hotspots as large as the Earth.

Those days of ferocious pounding saw the most energetic events ever witnessed. They struck a clear, vibrant chord in the public. Here was disaster, drama, danger. Chunks of ice and dust up to 2.5 miles across vaporized in fiery moments. Acne larger than worlds blotched Jupiter's face.

Scientists, too, got a bonus. Up through the entry tunnels in Jupiter's ammonia cirrus flowered plumes of fried debris. Surprisingly, there was no immediate evidence for water in the upwelling. Close study may reveal the depths of Jupiter's atmosphere, telling us much we could never learn on our own.

Many drew an even deeper lesson. Worldwide fascination focused beyond the fireworks, to the future. Could that happen to us? Sure; in fact, it has happened to our mother world before.

Meteoric bombardment has been well known to astronomers for well over a century. Sf authors, always game for a bit of catastrophe, started using the idea half a century ago.

The notion seems to have emerged because the striking photos from our planetary survey craft of the '60s and '70s underlined how many bodies in the inner solar system were riddled with impact craters — Mercury, Mars, of course our moon, and the moons of Jupiter as well. Meteor bombardment was once quite com-

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mon, and even now these bits of debris from the early solar system smash into some larger target. Each day about a hundred tons of small particles, mostly ice, falls into our own atmosphere.

I became involved with the idea of meteor impact as a threat in the 1960s, spurred by J.E. Enever's "Giant Meteor Impact" in the March, 1966 *Analog*. As far as I know, it was the first detailed study — one not referenced by astronomers.

The theme surfaced for me again in roundabout fashion, through a film deal which eventually aborted. In the late 1970s there blossomed a minigenre of what my friend Bill Rotsler termed Big Rock Hits Earth novels.

Bill and I had begun work on an idea I first used around 1970, for a short story called "Icarus Descending" (an *F&SF* cover story, 1972), and later incorporated into a novel, *In the Ocean of Night*. But partway through the novel Bill and I planned, we learned that two of our friends were nearly finished with *Lucifer's Hammer*. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle were using the idea because their editor, Bob Gleason, asked them to tone down a planned novel about alien invasion. Gleason liked the idea of demolishing civilization by dropping an asteroid on the Earth, and wanted them to separate it from the invasion plot.

Some products of that time were a TV movie somewhat based on *Lucifer's Hammer*, Sean Connery's worst film, *Meteor*, and finally the novel with Bill Rotsler, *Shiva Descending*. Because of delays after we turned in our manuscript, our novel appeared well after *Lucifer's Hammer*. Most of the writing was William's, with most of the science from me. Whereas most Big Rock books are disaster novels, this one, we resolved, would be about averting disaster, which seemed like more fun. It wouldn't be easy, we learned.

The science fiction community had long taken asteroid impacts as significant. I used the 1968 M.I.T. *Project Icarus* study for technical calculations — a compact little manual born in a special topics course for the ever-inventive MIT undergraduates, many of them sf fans. Inspired by Enever's article, it gave design specs, costs, probabilities, the works.

But mainstream scientists knew little of such matters then. In the decade since, science has seen a paradigm shift.

Now most believe that a ten-kilometer asteroid killed the dinosaurs. The revolution came from a thin sliver of the element iridium found worldwide, buried in fossil-

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bearing sedimentary rocks laid down 65 million years ago. Iridium is rare on Earth's surface, but more common in asteroids. The layer plainly pointed to an asteroid strike large enough to scatter iridium-tinged dust around the globe. Such an impact touches off a nightmare of storms, tsunamis, bitterly cold darkness, acid rains, global fires, and eventually maybe even greenhouse warming.

The iridium layer lies exactly at the point in the fossil record where the lovable lizards died. No rival theories of dinosaur extinction have nearly as much experimental evidence — including a hypothetical outburst of vulcanism, which could pump iridium-rich ore from the earth's metallic core. (See *Scientific American*, October 1990 for a round in the continuing battle.)

Iridium concentrations found in the USA and Latin America are thicker, strongly suggesting that the killer probably struck between Cuba and Panama, blasting a hundred-mile-wide crater in the ocean. A sea impact is worse than one on land, contrary to intuition. The jet of steam spikes up to the very edge of our atmosphere, then cloaks the planet in clouds for longer, plunging temperatures further and faster. The immediate blast effects are worse, too. It looks as though the American dinosaurs died first — within hours, in fact.

What's more, a further stunning bit of data startled the world in 1984: mass extinctions seemed to be periodic, coming every 32 million years. This implies that a dim, unrecognized companion star orbiting our sun may scramble up the orbits in the comet cloud beyond Pluto, sending them crashing into the inner planets. This as-yet unfound star was quickly dubbed "Nemesis." Niven and Pournelle used a similar agency to start their plot rolling. Luckily, the next comet storm seems to lie about fifteen million years in the future.

Is the periodicity real? Many dispute it now, and searches for the faint infrared dot that would mark our sun's brother have been futile. Nemesis would be on the very outer swing of its elliptical orbit, moving nearly directly away from us, and thus would show little apparent motion across the sky. This makes it indistinguishable from the plethora of dim dots in the infrared surveys, alas.

All this is heady stuff, but a more obvious danger lurks in the asteroids already circling the sun, in the realm of the inner planets — especially the Apollo-class asteroids, which cross our orbit. In 1978, when Rotsler and I were finishing the book, both the iridium discovery and Nemesis were

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years away — so I opted for the Apollo explanation. It seemed a less remote possibility, compared with a singular comet plunging in from beyond Pluto.

Since then, patient observers have picked out many more Apollo asteroids. Now they need not work from thin scratch-like signatures on photographic plates. New devices called charge-coupled detectors can sniff out dim dots of light and computer-compare them with images from an hour earlier, looking for traces of motion. Since they're near us and moving at about seven miles/second, even small asteroids of a mile or so across can stand out.

We have found about 200 near-Earth asteroids, adding another two or three a month. From estimates of how much of the night sky we've scrutinized, we can judge that about ten thousand whirl around in the space near us — and thus are candidates for a fateful crossing of their paths and ours.

These are a handy scientific resource, in a way. In terms of energy needed to get there, they are the simplest and cheapest missions we could fly which would return a sample. NASA estimates that for 150 million dollars we could get a kilogram or so back, fresh from one of the big rocks now looping sedately in and out of our orbit. This would be much easier than going to the asteroid belt itself for a sample, over twice as far from the sun as Earth.

Yet the sample would be of an asteroid, for the near-Earth vagrants are fugitives from the great belt of asteroids which hangs between Mars and Jupiter. The tidal interference of Jupiter stopped them from coalescing into a planet long ago. The nearest they got was Ceres, the largest asteroid, 933 kilometers across. Now any of the many millions of roughly mile-wide asteroids can smack into each other, resulting in chunky debris or even a coagulated, more massive body — bound on a fresh orbit, one that could strike an inner planet. We can calculate that the lifetime of such asteroids which wander into the inner solar system is fairly short — about one percent of the solar system's age, or forty-five million years. They end up contributing to the mass of the inner worlds, including ours.

About every century a meteor delivers an impact comparable to a nuclear warhead somewhere on Earth. The most recent, June 30, 1908, fell near the Siberian Tunguska River. It apparently was mostly ice, because it vaporized with an immense bang sensed by weather equipment in London, but leaving little iron or stone as evidence.

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In 1972 something came as close as you can get without hitting us. It skipped across the upper atmosphere above the USA, a bright trail picked up on radar. It had to be at least eighty feet across to make such a trail, skimming like a flat rock spun across a pond by a cosmic child — then gone. Since then, there have been two other recorded near misses. Those two were *known* objects, making calculated passes, missing the Earth by a few hours of orbital time.

And ninety-nine percent of the near-Earth rocks at least half a kilometer in size we haven't even found...

In 1991 this prompted several astronomers to call for a worldwide program to defend against these intruders. Their logic was simple. Even a rock half a kilometer in diameter would hit with energy equal to a thousand megatons of TNT — far greater than any nuclear weapon. If a bigger chunk hit us square on, it would destroy civilization, perhaps end the human species.

Think of it like an insurance agent. A big hit would kill about five billion people. Say the probability of this happening is once in fifty million years — a reasonable estimate, longer than the Nemesis time. (Asteroid astronomers say a big hit occurs between twenty-five and fifty million years, averaging over the last billion years of Earth's bombardment.) Then the death rate averaged over that whole time is about a hundred people per year.

Here statistics collide with our emotions. After all, such colossal impacts are very rare; why bother?

Surveys show that people regard risks rarer than the proverbial one in a million as too small to bother with. Asteroid danger is at this level. Still, statisticians forget that we do not feel through numbers. Studies show that people thinking about risk shrug off dry data, heavily favoring two emotional factors. They ask, *is it dreadful*? and *is it unfamiliar*?

Asteroid impact is both. Dreadful means huge, uncontrollable, with high risk to future generations. The unknown nature — we haven't thought about this before, and one could be heading for us right now — heightens our sense of threat.

This explains why people around the world reacted strongly to the bright Jovian fireballs. Most know that if such hammer blows exterminated the dinosaurs, they could kill us. Billions of us massacred, all at once, rivets attention more than the slow, steady deaths from well-known dangers, like heart disease and auto accidents.

How can we compare rare catastrophe with everyday danger? One

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way is to note that, averaged over long times and all humanity, you're as likely to die by asteroid impact as in an airplane crash.

Of course, you must be careful handling averages. I'm reminded of the doctor who told his patient that he had both good and bad news. The patient asked for the bad news first. "You have a disease which kills nine out of ten people who get it," the doctor said. "My God! What's the good news?" "Well, my last nine patients with this disease all died."

So we should ask ourselves, Does this rough equality with the airline death rate mean anything? Some are outraged at such statistics, as if to quantify human matters robs them of meaning. Alas, situations far beyond our experience, such as risks with low probability but immense consequences, require numbers outside our intuitive grasp. To get an idea of what risks are worth worrying about, consider our present policies. How much money does this society actually spend to prevent a hundred deaths?

That depends on both geography and culture. In health programs funded in the Third World, saving a *single* life costs about $200 (usually due to malnutrition). Cancer screening in advanced nations takes $75,000 to find an early cancer and stop its growth, extending a life for at least five more years. Think about the implications of these last two numbers: society's concern rises as dangers approach our personal phobias.

Thus, highway safety agencies in the USA spend about $120,000 to save a life, from better highway dividers, easier on-ramps and the like. Air pollution control costs roughly a million dollars to avoid one case of deadly lung disease. Eliminating natural radioactivity in drinking water would cost $5 million per life saved — which is why we don't do it. For nuclear plant safety, we spend $2.5 billion per life. (Hard to believe, yes. The Soviets spent far, far less and they got Chernobyl — which has killed about 100 people directly so far, harmed thousands, and promises to kill many thousands over the next few decades, by delayed cancers. In the USA there hasn't yet been a single bystander death from nuclear power, luckily. The estimated death rate from breathing the fumes of oil and coal-fired power plants, though, is about 10,000 nationally. That's a major cost in the air pollution expense above.)

Suppose we accept the value placed on life in the industrial nations. Taking the cancer screening level of spending, times a hundred deaths per year, we get $7.5 million/

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year — just about enough to find all asteroids near us within a decade and assess our danger.

Like any rational calculus, outcome strongly depends on assumptions. Ours is a rather rarefied argument, spreading the kill rate from one big hit over fifty million years — mathematically interesting, perhaps, but is it convincing? Does it hit people in the guts, where they live?

Here those two elements, *dreadful* and *strange*, may well settle the issue. People *care* about so immense a disaster, the end of civilization. As calamities go, this one plays in Peoria.

In contrast, policy mavens such as William Pfaff have already derided Congressional funding to search for asteroid threats. They clearly see a one-in-a-million chance as beyond the pale. Pfaff gloomily noted that since "at some point the world will come to an end," why prevent "the eventually inevitable"? Far better to spend the money on, say, Bosnia.

I must admit I have a visceral objection to this line of argument. (Does Pfaff take antibiotics if he gets an infection? He's interfering with God's will!) In gut terms, I suspect he is wrong; the sheer drama of such calamity will drive public policy to take the threat seriously.

Suppose we find that we are in some danger? Then an investment of about $50 million a year (with some bigger start-up costs, mostly in recasting existing weaponry) would provide a stand-by capability of knocking out the intruder, even if the warning only gives us a matter of weeks to act. It would be much less expensive if we have several years' warning.

By historical accident, we have already spent a trillion dollars developing the instruments which can kill an asteroid — the hydrogen bomb and the liquid chemical rocket. Actually, their simultaneous appearance is no accident — the rocket was pushed strongly after the massive war which introduced nuclear explosives. They were made for each other, and their fateful wedding has sealed the strategic standoff which has made our time tense but strangely peaceful, compared to the half-century before it.

Rendezvous an automatic craft with the offending rock, place a warhead (or several) next to it — and set it off with a remote command. Reduced to chunks a few meters across, the killer becomes a mere spectacular amusement. When it hits our upper atmosphere, the cloud of debris will make a brilliant meteor shower, streamers burning in blues and yellows, flashing orange and gold for many minutes.

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We have to be careful about slinging nuclear devices around, of course. Carl Sagan has forcefully objected to any standing ability to put nuclear warheads into space, arguing that they could be co-opted for Earthly wars. True enough — but the force needed would be small, certainly not enough to destroy a country.

More generally, we should recognize that dealing in astronomical matters *necessarily* demands harnessing energies of immense scale. Lifting off, Apollo 11 burned as much oxygen as half a billion people. Stopping big threats demands big guns to knock them down. If humanity learns that we have a foreseeable danger of extinction of our species, who would oppose developing the means to stop it?

We might have little warning of a suspect intruder. That would mean trying to hit the incoming rock in the last few hours of its approach — the worst case scenario.

A dud device could mean we fail to destroy the target. Even if we did, there would be a high cost for an explosion which did not touch our fragile atmosphere at all. We have many billions of dollars of orbiting servants — mostly, communications satellites — which a nuclear blast would kill. Not through the shock wave, but through an effect we discovered in the late 1950s. The Argus experiments of that era set off hydrogen warheads in space over the south Pacific. Within minutes, swarms of electrons lit up the auroral regions at both poles. Satellites went off the air, permanently silenced.

The reason was simple — in hindsight. A nuclear device makes a plasma cloud of ionized matter. Electrons, liberated from their peaceful atoms, streak away. They infest the metallic satellites, swamping their electronics gear. They race along the earth's magnetic field, concentrating at the poles and lighting up the high atmosphere with their energies. A nuclear explosion these days would destroy a fortune in satellites, and worse, shut down the vast net of communications we have built up.

So we cannot hit an incoming rock anywhere in the vast zone dominated by the earth's magnetic field. This region, called the magnetosphere, extends about ten times the earth's radius into space, roughly a tenth of the way to the moon. We would have to block the intruder somewhere beyond that — the further, the better — so that the nuclear debris will be blown outward by the solar wind, away from Earth and ultimately into the realm beyond the solar system. In turn, that requires a good idea of where the candidate in-

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truders are, how they move, their size. A solar system inventory.

Saving the world for a few billion dollars — rather a bargain, I think. NASA's present annual budget is over fourteen billion. A hundred million for finding the candidate rocks isn't beyond our means. True, the odds of a thousand-megaton impact occurring right away are small — one hits about every ten thousand years. There has been none in recorded history, which coincidentally is a span of about ten thousand years. Of course, an impact in, say, the Pacific ocean might not have excited enough interest in ancient Babylon to have merited being inscribed in mud tablets — or the tablets might be lost by now. Such events are random, of course, so the odds of their happening in a given year don't get higher if you go a long spell without one — as we have. In fact, some astronomers believe that a large comet broke up in the inner solar system about 20,000 years ago. It left swarms of debris which we see in annual, regular meteor showers. But probably there are much larger chunks, still unseen, swooping by us in the dark.

Some argue that we should be making a solar system inventory anyway, taking the long view of what we may need in the next century. Uplifting the bulk of humanity from poverty, where a paltry $200 can save a starving child, will demand resources far beyond those we know.

Within a century, I believe the inner solar system will begin to yield up its resources. It will have to. I cannot see how we can sustain a technological society in this thin, rather delicate biosphere, if we keep mining and smelting and burning as we have. In the long run, only a practice of doing the dirty jobs of resource extraction outside the biosphere will make sense. Metals, the crucial ingredient in modern technologies, are getting harder and harder to scrape out of the crust of our Earth.

Far better, then, to mine a tumbling mountain for iron, manganese or platinum, than to blow it to smithereens.

Jupiter's agony has illuminated our own predicament and opportunity. For many, NASA is a synonym for *boring*. A search for civilization-killing monsters a mile across is both dramatic and, in the astronomical scale of budgets, inexpensive. The public will support it, intuitively sensing its importance.

Our House of Representatives has already voted to require NASA to track asteroids whose orbits might intersect Earth's. More legislation seems on the way. Seizing this oppor-

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tunity with some fanfare would be smart public relations and smart science.

Also, for once we humans would be defending the entire ecosphere, not just ourselves. Not only humans would die in a large impact.

Like it or not, we are the sole stewards of our world, in all its rich abundance. The dinosaurs were once, too — but look what happened to them.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. E-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Leonard Rysdyk attended Clarion West in 1990. Since then he has gotten married, had a child, and sold fiction to Aboriginal SF *and* Snow White, Blood Red. *"The Holo-Man" marks Leonard's first appearance in* F&SF.

He writes, "I met [my wife] while I was attending Clarion in Seattle (she was one of the organizers) and we spent two years dating by telephone. She suggested that virtual reality would solve our distance problem. I couldn't help thinking of all the other problems it would cause. Hence, 'The Holo-Man.'"

The Holo-Man

By Leonard Rysdyk

I WAS A PARK RANGER ON El Dorado, a newly opened-up planet eighty light-years from Earth. There were sixty of us then. We repaired the robots and logged and loaded samples for the yearly transport back to Earth, but mostly we babysat the visitors. Scientourists, we called them. Groundhogs. They logged on to our virtual reality network by tachyon beam from the comfort of their own living rooms and told themselves they were going where no one had gone before. All right: they served a useful function, guiding the remote sensing robots, supplying the curiosity that the AIs could only simulate, but I had the dream job. I was really there, on planet, live and in person. I had trained to be a Ranger, done whatever it took to get off that dying dustbin Earth and come to the splendors of an unknown world. My life mattered: I was an explorer, an adventurer. I had it all. Then one day she appeared and my life stopped like a computer program that just caused a system error. Crash.

The first time I saw her, she was tall and slender with an athlete's body,

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perfect glow-in-the-dark skin and a floating halo of light brown hair. God knows what she looked like for real. She was coming on to me — predictably. No wilderness adventure was complete without boffing one of the noble-savage Rangers at the trading post. No skin off my nose. Once things got under way, I usually put them on automatic and went out for dinner. Getting back, I'd find two holographic lovers in the monitor, sweating and scrambling on the zero-g bed. Of course, sometimes I'd stay for the whole thing. Other people's fantasies have a torpid similarity, but in the rig you can't tell real from virtual and a man has his urges.

The next time I saw her, she had filled out. She was more voluptuous and more muscular as well; her hair was long and auburn, coiled in loose curls down her back. The strange thing was that she returned at all. I rarely saw a scientourist twice. There were a few experts — UNASA people, academics, aficionados — but they found their own way around; they logged on for knowledge. The others came for thrills. They told themselves they were performing a public service by guiding remote sensors for the NSI databank, but they were really just on vacation. Jaunting was in. A world a weekend, that was the thing.

So there she was on Saturday night. I was stowing remotes, assigning robots to repair jobs and talking to Imogen on audio-only when the woman walked in and leaned against the high back of my mahogany desk. It's hot in my office, a tropical scenario. There's a ceiling fan turning overhead, the transient hum of a mosquito and the deep, humid smell of the jungle. I looked up from the ledger that is the metaphor for my controls and saw for the first time she had these deeply *purple* eyes. What's she doing back here? I thought. I was already involved with Imogen, another Ranger and an actual live woman whose hair wasn't immutably coiffed, whose breath gave me chills when she whispered in my ear. I had no time for a groundhog in a baggie. Anyway, one minute I was thinking that no one has ever come back for me, and the next I was putting a doppel on the line to Genny and leading this tourist, this *virtual* woman, into the back room and lying down with her on sacks of...flour? I was making love to a simulacrum with a passion I hadn't felt since I left Earth and she was calling my name like it was the name of god and her breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine and I thought jesus! she has good equipment. White powder rose around us and the chain tapped against the single bare bulb that was the only light in the room.

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I slipped off the pile of sacks onto the floor. "Who are you?" I asked. My pants were around my knees but I didn't see her clothes anywhere. She leaned up on one elbow and looked at me, a flour smudge on her cheek. Reaching out a graceful arm that was muscled like a dancer's, she touched my face. "Shh," she said and smiled. Then she disappeared.

Goddamn rude bitch! No exit: zero verisimilitude, like she had switched off her rig. Not that it's against the rules. Nothing is, except you don't attempt virtual suicide and damage the remotes or shoot up the territory under investigation. But switching off! It just isn't done. I zipped up my pants, then realized I was wasting time; no one was watching me. A red light flashed in the center of my vision and I remembered I left Genny on automatic. I switched to audio.

"Are you there, Hideashi?" she said.

"I'm always there for you, kid," I heard myself saying. How long had my doppel been feeding her banalities, waiting for me to intervene with a decision?

"Yashi, I'm warning you..."

"Okay, I'm a little preoccupied, I admit," I jumped in. "Someone crashed a heli on Coronado, and back on Columbus the repair robot's out of replacement fasteners and...." I called up the mystery woman's log-on info. She registered only under the initials "D. D."

"All right, all right," she said, "but tell me straight, are you coming over here or not?"

"What, for real?" I said. I called for the tourist's account info, but all I got was "Private." Wow. Privacy was expensive.

"'Course for real, you dope. I can have any *virtual* man in the universe. Goddamn you tonight."

"Just joking, sweetcakes," I said. "See you in an hour."

"Okay," Genny said, but I could hear the pout in her voice. "Now come on full-aspect and give me a kiss."

"Anything," I said sweetly and went to automatic. "Smack. Later, babe," I heard myself say.

When the session was over, I thought about cracking the woman's privacy, but it would take a while to program a knowbot and I had promised to visit Genny, so I just knocked off. The machine let me down easy. As the lush jungle odor was replaced by the dusty smell of my domicile, I opened the

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back door of my factor's office. Instead of the storeroom where I had made love to the virtual woman, there were my cramped quarters. The rig set me on the real floor, transition complete. I unzipped the baggie, and extricated myself.

It took a while. The suit was my interface between the robots that traveled the hostile terrain of the planet and my five senses. When I turned my head, a distant robot rotated its camera. When I reached out my hand, the robot extended an aluminum arm and, as one, we plucked a flower or grabbed a rock. I heard what its microphones heard and I felt what its piezoelectric skin felt. When the anemometer on the robot sampled the wind speed, little cilia inside my suit tickled my skin. When the robot hooked itself to a heli-tractor, I saw myself entering an aircar. That illusion allowed computer-generated images to serve as controls. I could reach out and move a throttle that existed only as an image in my goggles and a sensation in my glove and control the robot intuitively. More than being the simplest way to control the heli or any of the tools the robot carried or even the VR environment itself, these illusions added to an explorer's sense of reality. El Dorado was not a simulation or a video game. It was a real place and it was important for the explorer to feel he was really there.

My equipment was state of the art, so my sense of reality was superb. Most of the tourists could not afford the equivalent, so they made do with visual and audio inputs with maybe a power glove for some tactile feedback. On the other hand, they could get in and out of their equipment more easily than I could.

I lifted off the headset. I pulled my arms and legs out of the pneumatic activators that sent my motions to remotes and provided feedback. I pulled off gloves, catheter, and IV, so the suit hung on the cables that allowed me to move freely without going anywhere. It looked like a scuba diver that had fallen backwards into the biggest spider web in history. I was back in reality.

Reality! I had been in the baggie the whole Earthly weekend. My head ached; my vision swam and my knees were so shaky, I banged my shin against the unmade bed. Covering my eyes, I reeled into the corner, and flicked on the shower. Cold water shocked me back to my own senses. Toweling off, I swore for the fiftieth time to wash my limp jeans and T-shirt, pulled them on anyway, and tramped across the compound to Imogen's.

Beyond the fence, it was night on El Dorado. I stopped under the sodium lights and sniffed the exotic smells. From the darkness, eyes gleamed at me.

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The place was vibrating with life, tingling with strangeness. It gave off the same sort of nearly erotic excitement as when you walk into a party: all eyes turn to you and you wonder who you'll meet and what you'll do together. I thought about going into the dark and looking at the strange stars; I even wandered close enough to the electrified fence to hear it hum, but — why bother? The rig took me everywhere. I hardly ever went out.

Imogen was drying her hair as I entered the two by four plastifoam box that was her domicile. There was barely space for the door to swing and the bed squeaked when she plumped down on it to let me in. The room smelled of soap.

"Finally," Imogen said and curled up her legs on the rumpled sheets. She rubbed her head roughly and her small breasts jiggled. The pink towel hid her face. It was strange to see a real woman's body. I am so used to people's platonic conceptions of themselves that blemishes and disproportions — the birthmark on Imogen's left arm, her knobby knees — they give me goosebumps. I sat next to her on the bed and the touch of her damp skin was a tremendous turn-on. I immediately became excited and we made love in the clumsy way embodied people do, then rolled apart exhausted. In reality, sex is over so fast.

Genny took my hand and pressed it to her damp chest. The room smelled of sweat and sex, like nothing I ever experienced with virtual women. They like their lusts sanitized. My head was still woozy from the physical effort of screwing when it dawned on me that Genny was talking, saying something about the scientourist she had shepherded that afternoon.

"'Check the specs,' I told him, but he was a dunce, so I ran that macro you gave me." She talked fast and the subject and her enthusiasm for it was contagious. "I followed the tracks over a hill. Hoofed prints, but only one set. Then I saw it. Big as a hyrax, but so still, its attention fixed — it was stalking something." Her eyes widened and she flushed from her chest to her cheeks.

"A hoofed predator?" I blurted out. "A cross-adaptation! That would be like finding a carnivorous kangaroo back on Earth. There could be a whole new branch of evolution to discover. Do you know what this means?"

She smiled at me benevolently, her small eyes blue and bright. "Yes," she said.

"Of course you do," I said. "And I walked all over your story."

"It's fun to see you excited. It's one of your best qualities."

There was an awkward silence while she appreciated me. Awkward for

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me, anyway. You want a woman to like you more than you like her — so she stays faithful — but not so much that she clings. It's hard to keep a lover so delicately balanced. Finally, I said, "So...?"

"I shot a noose, but it wiggled free."

"No!" I lay back, disappointed. "I'd never let it get away, even if I had to take a static sample."

"My great, non-white hunter," she said. She smiled as she touched my face with the back of her hand. "I'll go back tomorrow with a trap."

I said, "That's your tenth new-species find, isn't it?"

"Eleventh," she answered. "But who's counting?" But she knew I was, because she said, "It could have been yours. You put me on to the Guerrero region. You could have followed up, but you went racing off to something else."

"Have you broadcast it yet?"

She shook her head.

"If it had been me," I said, "I would have logged it already."

"I wanted to wait," she said, "until we were together — in person. To share it with you." She's always doing that. Trying to make special moments.

"Oh. Thanks."

Imogen put her arm through mine and said something about moving her stuff into my domicile. She rattled on about us waking up together, using the same shower, working side-by-side.

The problem with real women is that they talk even more than virtual ones, since tourists have to pay for log-on time whenever they're not on assignment and tachyon transmission costs a bundle. I yessed Imogen to death, but I was wondering about the virtual woman, why she had come back and why I was so excited by her.

"So it's settled, then," Imogen said. "I'll move my rig in the morning?"

I didn't know her name; I couldn't even call her. "Sure."

Imogen kissed me excitedly, but I mumbled something about being tired and rolled over. "Aren't you happy about this?" she said.

"My neck.... " I said. You don't realize how much you move your head in real life until you climb into a baggie and whip heavy goggles around. You can always tell a VR pro because his or her neck is like a Greek column. "Doesn't yours ache?"

"Of course," she said. "Good night."

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I imagined the soft curls tumbling down her slim neck. Those startling violet eyes. Why did she just disappear? My mind was whirling when strong fingers began unraveling the tangled cords of my neck. "Wow, you're really tight," came Genny's voice from over my shoulder. I dreamed of the virtual woman as I fell asleep.

She appeared in the office the next morning. Her silver hair was teased so it floated around her head like rays of light. Her lips were red as if carefully made up. Odd. Virtual people don't wear make up; they *are* made up. I liked the patterns she had chosen. The floating hair was *au courant* back home and a welcome change from the dowdy utilitarian styles of my fellow Rangers. And very red lips were a particular favorite of mine, a real turn-on. Had she read my preferences chart? We stared at each other for a while, admiring or sizing each other up. You can change your appearance in VR, but you can't change yourself. People's essence always comes through the video buffer. The way they stand, move. The person behind the persona.

"That was some trick you pulled," I said. I was trying to catch her off guard, but she took my hand.

"I'm sorry I cut you off," she said. "I can explain later, but first take me out again. Just the two of us."

So much for getting the upper hand. I made the station self-monitoring and we walked through the door.

Normally, a doppel goes along as the visitors and the cameras fly to their destination. Our visitors are scientourists, after all. They come to see wide open spaces, so we fly them out and give them lunch, just like regular nature guides. Then we let them aim our cameras for us. From time to time, I would check in to make sure some tenderfoot hadn't gotten excited and overridden mission specs. We didn't need anybody to re-discover rainbow rocks for the five hundredth time.

That day, I went along myself. I thought if I could just get her name, then I could crack her privacy, solve the mystery and forget about her. At first, I relied on the scenery to do the trick. El Dorado is a wild and beautiful place. The planet is in its own Pleistocene era with hundreds of species competing for niches. Right before your eyes, evolution is at work, red in tooth and claw. We were always on the verge of finding something amazing which makes it a great place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there. That's why we sent out the robots. The terrain seems new too, unspoiled and often untrodden.

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Everything is sparkling and snapping with vitality and there are sights here like there were on Earth once, before luxury condos were built on them.

The aircar swept between the snowcapped peaks of Montezuma and Cortez and over the purple valley at their feet. I waited for her to "ooh" and "ah" like the others, but she kept her back stiffly straight — regally, I thought — and looked calmly out the window. The aircar turned on its axis to let us look back and see the falls. They were a klick wide and three hundred meters high. I caught my breath every time I saw them; Imogen would have been pointing and noticing things, but the woman was as calm as ever.

Then I remembered that she hadn't come for the scenery; she had come for me. If I started talking, maybe she would loosen up like Imogen did.

"That's Tenochtitlán Falls," I said, "I discovered them."

"Discovered?"

"Well, me and some groundhog — tourist, I mean — but it was my mission, my idea. I named them for the city of the Aztecs." I felt myself getting excited, and hoped my enthusiasm would be contagious. "That was what I wanted all my life: to find a new place and give it a name. Put it on the map. I wish I could tell you what a thrill it is to discover something." I saw that she was looking at me intently and listening with rapt attention. I fell into her eyes.

Before I knew it, I told her everything about myself, the species I found, the locations I named, even the trip from Earth and where I came from back home. We were almost at our destination when I realized I was the one who had been doing all the talking. I guess I'm more excitable than I am sophisticated.

A little too abruptly, I asked her to tell me something about herself. "I'm not very interesting," she said.

"Why did you buy all the VR equipment?"

"How do you know I didn't rent it?"

"It's too high quality. You've got stuff on your system even UNASA hasn't got." I felt a little thrill. I was engaged in a battle of wits, a game of cat and mouse. Each of us was trying to reveal a little but not too much, to tease and lead the other on. This was fun. Not like the tedious routines of Ranger life and love, where everything is understood all at once, a bunch of kissing cousins in a small town.

"I like to travel and I can afford it."

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So she has money. "What's life like at home?"

"Empty," she said, then she caught herself. "Why do you want to know about me?"

"I need to, if we're going to be more than Ranger and guest."

"Is that what we're going to be?"

She caught me off guard. I had assumed because she returned, a relationship was what she wanted. A fling, at least. She sat there looking at me with a penetrating gaze — her irises were wide, I noticed. She had excellent, expressive equipment.

"I hope so," I said. It was usually the right thing to say.

"So do I," she admitted and my heart leaped. She is undiscovered country, I thought. That was an attraction I would not be able to shake.

At a distance of about eight klicks, we set down in the path of a huge herd of pachypods. The aircar rose again to hover overhead, and I walked a spiral pattern, flattening the graingrass to clear a work area for us. As my persona bent and stretched out its hands, the wiry plants fell away like fainting moviequeens. In reality, the robot on site had activated a mowing attachment.

The woman spread a red checkered cloth on the ground and unpacked a wicker basket. I pressed the start button on a camera and it whirred off to meet the herd. When I bent to program another one, a glint of light made me turn. She sat with her legs tucked under her on the picnic cloth and was rubbing each piece of silverware with a napkin before setting it next to a plate. She smiled when she saw me looking.

"Tell me your name," I said.

As the virtual woman chatted idly, avoiding the question, I heard a distant, dull thumping, something I had never heard before. I tried to talk to the virtual woman, but the banging distracted me. Then I realized what it was: someone was banging on the rig itself. I set another camera in flight, hoping the noise would cover me. I put my persona on automatic and unhooked my headset, pulled the zipper and peeked out of the rig. There was my doppel on the monitor talking to the tourist and here was Genny pounding on the pneumatic tube that controlled the feedback to my head unit.

"Genny, what are you doing here?" This was not good timing.

"I'm moving in, remember?"

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"Oh, yeah."

"Why are you setting the cameras?" she said. "That's the tourist's job."

"I have to keep an eye on her," I said. "She's curious, but unstable."

"How do you know?"

I thought fast. "Uh — she was up here before. Got a real interest in the planet."

"Is she the one who ditched the sled?"

"What? Oh, yeah! Listen, can you do me a favor? Check her out for me. Somehow she got on without registering. She's got great software."

"She's got privacy!" Genny looked at the monitor where the virtual woman was smoothing her skirt. "I'd like to know who she is myself." She got into her baggie.

"Thanks." Pleased at the irony that Genny would help me find out who her competition was, I ducked into the bag and back to the virtual woman.

"Make something up," she said.

"Like a pet name?" I said, taking over from the doppel. "Clarissima? Bébé? Snookums?"

"No, no, no!" She laughed.

"Then you tell me. Something real. Just between us." I was so pleased with my subtlety I almost burst.

Programmed, the camera hummed like a threatened beehive and took off. Its wash blew dust everywhere, but she just moved a strand of hair from her face; the draft hadn't touched her.

"You don't take 'no' for an answer," she said.

I walked toward her. "How can we build a relationship if we don't get to know each other?" "Relationship" is a key word for women. Opens them right up.

"What kind of a relationship can we have?"

"Any kind you want."

"I was hoping you'd say that." She rose and walked toward me, her big-buttoned safari skirt blowing out behind her. She came close. "Call me Dolores," she said and kissed me hard.

Paydirt! I took her in my arms. Her hands on my back pulled me to her and told me she was mine. What a prize! Clever, rich, yet her sophistication had fallen before me like graingrass. That made her seem vulnerable, too, and even more attractive. I swung her around, reveling in my victory.

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Suddenly, I realized her log-on name, "D. D." or "Deedee," was a nickname for "Dolores." Liar, I thought, but no — she's teasing me. The game is still on. Then, a light flashed in the center of my vision and brought me back to business: the herd was coming. I hurried to finish programming the last unit. When I turned, the woman was sitting on the picnic cloth, unbuttoning her khaki skirt to reveal black fishnet stockings. Nice! I went to her quickly. She looked up at me like she was hungry.

I lay down and kissed her. The wind blew her hair against my cheek — what a rig she had! — and she pulled my shirttails out of my safari shorts. I rolled on top of her and through her bones I could feel the oncoming pawbeats. I kissed her ear and she reached around to pull her hair away from her swanslim neck. I could hear them now, the approaching herd. "I want to feel close to you," I said into her ear. Women love that. They want to know you're thinking of them when you screw them, as if it mattered. "Tell me your *real* name."

She drew back, looked at me with her violet eyes. "No," she said. Gravel and dust were flung on us. And she disappeared.

I fell hard onto the checked cloth and the pachypods thundered around me. "Bitch!" I yelled.

I switched v/i's. Looking down from the hovering aircar, I saw the herd splitting around the remote sensing robot that had been me, its aluminum arms still raised in a gesture of anguish. The shot was too tight, so I flew higher to capture the full pattern of the mating dance. The herd made intricate curlicues, the animals forming triads, rubbing shoulders and shaking their heads. I zoomed in for closeups. It would have been something to see, if I hadn't been so pissed off.

I was too much of a pro to set the cameras on auto, pull out and go back to the station. I stayed to finish the filming and collect the equipment — the tourist's job — and get the aircar headed to base, but as soon as I was back at my desktop, I called Imogen. She'd be in her rig, only a few feet away, but no closer than in virtual reality. She might even know who the mystery woman was by now and if she did, I was going to ban "Dolores" from the entire interplanetary VR system. I was boiling over with anger and lust and could not call Imogen up fast enough. She appeared at her desk wearing her blue blazer. "Hello..." she said and looked blank for a moment — what the hell, I thought, a recording? — then blinked as the proper subroutine kicked in,

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"...Hideashi. My stuff's moved in — what a mess! And I tried to check on that tourist, but all the pathways were blocked. She must be some rich bitch. Or maybe she's somebody important playing hookey from work. I'm really suspicious, but I could only take one try before I had to fly to Balboa to repair the maintenance robot. I'm in transit, now. As soon as I can, I'll get on-line from there. I miss you!" She blinked back to the original program. "Do you have any further message? Thank you for calling."

"Damn!" I said and slammed my desk so hard the inkwell fell to the floor and shattered. I kicked the fragments and got black stains on my kneesocks. Then I calmed down and reversed the simulation to clean up the spill — I wasn't going to get down on my hands and knees to clean up a virtual mess. There was no sense shutting down if Genny was going to call, so I took a deep breath, checked the other remotes and put in a sleep tape.

Kisses woke me. Genny was leaning close, stroking my hair. I inhaled, hoping for perfume, but all I got was the polyethylene smell of my own inhaler. Genny was in the bush and didn't have all her options available. Nevertheless, her eyes were more blue, her hair more blonde than when I last saw her, and the body that pressed against me was softer and rounder than her real one.

"Did you find anything out about the tourist?" she said in her huskier-than-real voice.

"Forget her," I said and took Imogen in my arms. "I wanted the real you tonight," I said passionately.

"I couldn't help it, honey." We clenched and kissed, but when I rolled on top of her, I remembered how I had been dumped in the dirt that afternoon. I bit Imogen's neck hard. The rubber squeeze ball in my feedback unit tasted bitter, but not enough to break the illusion.

"Oh, my!" Imogen gasped as the impression of my teeth activated tiny needles on her unit's collar. She dug her nails into my back. "Damn this second-rate unit!"

I felt a vibration in my ear, but kept kissing Imogen, wrestling her into position. The tickling grew more insistent; my audiophone had an emergency message. I reached out until the hand in my rig keyed the menu that floated at the top of my vision when no other metaphor was available. I pushed "Slow, Romantic" under "Macros" to put Genny on automatic and take the call.

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"Hello," said the virtual woman's voice.

"How the hell did you get in here?" I said, my finger on "Disconnect."

"I couldn't stop thinking about you," she said. "And I couldn't figure out why I ran away. I could have gotten out of the rig. I could have watched you in the holograph monitor and laughed while you did it with my doppelgänger."

Damn, she knew all the tricks. "Just tell me how you got on my emergency channel — "

"My system's loaded. I have override programs, priority protocols."

"You goddamn rich people."

"Listen. I admit I lied to you on the prairie, but I knew right away you saw through me. You're smart and I was scared. I've been looking for a man like you through all twelve discovered planets, but you know how it is when you find what you want. You get scared. Now...I want to share myself with you, my real self, like you wanted. Yet I've been so rude, you might never want to see me again. Just say so and I'll go away forever. But I had to tell you."

All this on audio, not even a hologram of her to look at. "Hold on," I said. My doppel had just gotten out of bed to light some candles. I pulled this program from a how-to manual; it didn't miss a trick.

Normally, I would have kept affairs going with both women — the good thing about VR is you don't have to make choices — but with Imogen moved in, things were going to get awkward. Luckily, she was away now or the whole conversation would be on the monitor for her to see and I had no way to shut it off; it's a safety device. No way around it: I was going to have to dump one or the other and that was always ugly.

Not that I hadn't done it before — I was an expert. But my last night on Earth I had an experience that still made me flinch. I had been living with an actress, a French woman, full of naked passion. I hadn't told her when I was going to leave — I see that as a mistake now, but I liked a quick clean break. That was my style. The time came — she went wild. It was horrible. Her eyes bulged. She grabbed her head and crouched over like she was getting ready to leap out of her body. I had never seen a human being act this way. Then she clawed at me. Begged and shrieked, "Don't leave me!" Her face was swollen, red and teary and the noises that came from her throat, like from a wounded animal. Then she sank to the floor and got real quiet. I relaxed. Suddenly her hand was in the drawer and she had a kitchen knife as big as her forearm. I grabbed her skinny wrists. She was hysterically strong and I felt the small

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bones of her thin arms twist in my hands as I overpowered her. The neighbors burst in and broke us up. I never knew whether the knife was for her or me. With all those people staring at me and her sobbing on the floor, I almost threw up, it was so embarrassing.

My choice now should have been obvious. Imogen was sweet and dependable and as the top two explorers on planet, we had a lot in common. But the virtual woman was going through a lot of expense just to see ME — very flattering — and she was promising to open up. In VR, you can always wear a mask, but she was willing to bare her soul. That touched me. And I wanted to see what her bare soul looked like — while I kept my mask on. Finally, it was smart politics to let her down easy. Everybody knew what went on in VR, but it was not cool to get complaints about your social dealings made to UNASA. So half out of caution, half out of temptation, I decided to play along.

I pulled up a subroutine that interpolated my doppel into another program. The instructional tape would run for hours. The program clicked in and my doppel flickered a little as he came back to the bed. Damn glitch! I zoomed in to see if Imogen noticed, but her eyes shone from the candles like she was in love. Perfect!

The woman was sitting on the edge of a rattan chair in my office. In a short plaid skirt and white blouse, she had dressed the part of a penitent schoolgirl, though her kneesocks covered the tapering calves of a mature woman. She reached out tentatively and I took her hand.

"Come on," she said.

She led me through the doorway into a dark corridor where the storeroom had been. There was no reason why such a corridor should be in my supposed factor's building, but we were still on my system: transitional sequences were a rule. We walked past torches set in widely separated sconces until we came to a long flight of stone stairs. Our footsteps echoed as we climbed until finally we emerged from a subway entrance onto a city street. It was night. The air smelled of rain and the wet asphalt reflected the steetlights. A dialog box popped up to tell me we were off my system now and onto hers. I held her hand more tightly.

"Where are we?" I said.

"Flushing," she said. "New York, East America. This is where I grew up." We walked past ground cars that held sleeping people, whole families,

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it looked like. The place resembled my old hometown of Toronto. The decay was why I left. Then the scene changed suddenly as we turned a corner.

"That's my old high school," she said. "Tough territory." The building obviously had been bombed. We turned a corner where a chain link fence protected a tumbledown brick building. "My grade school." This trip down memory lane wasn't what I expected and it was depressing me. I wanted to know where she lived now. Claws rustled on broken glass below windows so ruined even the mullions were gone. I wondered about Genny and how much time was left on the tape. Heads turned as we walked. The few people we passed weren't used to seeing remote camera units rolling down their streets. This area was completely forgotten, even by VR. Around another corner and we stood before a burned-out building that leaned over like a crushed face. "And this is my old house."

"What a dump," I said. I stumbled over something soft, but didn't look down to see what it was. "I got the impression from your equipment you were rich."

"I made my money the old-fashioned way," she said and smiled. "I married it."

"You're married?"

She pulled me on. "One more corner," she said and the world changed. A bright building of glass rectangles rose above squalid row houses. She must have a dozen remote units scattered around the city. Or she had recorded this earlier with one remote — either way, she had planned it all. So much for baring her soul, but what was she up to? Whatever it was, I wasn't enjoying it. I needed an exit line.

"That's the hospital where I was born," she said. "Look: sixth floor, on the end. There's a light. Where my mother first held me." In the light reflected from the building, she looked like she was glowing with the warmth of her memories. "It's a seniority home, now, full of old people, withering, dying, wishing to be young and beautiful again, even for one last moment."

It all made sense now. She was like those people, only richer, and her last fling was to use VR technology to lead me on a chase. What did she want — for me to fall in love with her? She had played well, I had to admit; she had me fascinated or I wouldn't be here, but I saw my way out.

"Let's go up," I said. "Maybe you know somebody there and could say something to cheer them up."

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She shook her head. "No. That light means someone can't sleep. There's too much pain in her body, or too many bad memories."

I caught the clue and it made me feel sorry for her. It was her in that room. Through her bit-mapped schoolgirl's skin, I saw a wrinkled hulk working the actuators with withered limbs, straining with her last strength to act as young as she made herself appear. The person comes through the persona.

"Why are we here, *Dolores*?" I emphasized the word to remind her she had not yet told me her name as she promised.

"I wanted to show you my life story, from the cradle to the — present." She leaned against me, soft and tall. "But I have one more place to show you to bring you up to date."

I started to refuse, but suddenly the sidewalk was gone and my bare toes were wiggling in the damp sand of a moonlit beach. Waves crashed and my breather pumped in salt-scented air.

Before us stood a huge beach house. It was one of those things you see in the movies. Modernist, with curving balconies and glass block walls. She led me inside, over tile floors, past a little fountain and through living rooms as big as basketball courts. If this were real, it must have cost even more than her VR rig. We went through sliding glass doors big enough for an airplane hangar and onto a wooden deck. Below it, a beach sloped gently from the house toward the shushing sea.

"This must have cost a mint," I said turning and craning my neck to take it all in. "But it makes me wonder: what about your husband?" I didn't mention that she had skipped a large piece of her life — everything since high school. Unless she expected me to believe she was a recent graduate!

"My husband died here, on a night like this." The wind blew the ends of her white lace skirt. "He was a theatrical producer. Live theater is all the rage now, did you know?"

"Of course," I snapped. What was I, a rube?

"I lived through him: his money, his friends. After he died, I bought the rig, to travel, to lose myself. But really, I was looking — and I found you."

She looked at me a long time, smiling like the Mona Lisa. I had the feeling she was not trying to think of what to say, but was turning over words she had rehearsed, savoring them deliciously before she made them known. "I love it here," she said softly, "but it's empty and I'm alone." Slowly, then, she leaned against me and rested her hand on my chest. "Come and live here with

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me. I mean it! Not in VR, but in the flesh."

I shook my head; I almost laughed. "I'm a Ranger," I said. "I spent my whole life trying to get away from Earth!"

"I know it's crazy, and I expected you to say no. But that day in the aircar, when you talked about adventure — you were overwhelming. There aren't any men left like you on Earth, they've all gone to the planets. Compared to you, there are no men left here at all."

"What would I do on Earth?"

"I've thought it all through. You could give lectures. No Ranger ever comes back. I know agents and managers. They could promote you — a one-man show. You'd be a star!"

I saw myself for a moment standing before an audience, hundreds of people hanging on my every word and in the end applauding. The fame. The money.

It didn't seem likely. And she wasn't going to spill, so it was time for the kiss off. "You've forgotten one thing," I said. "We're not on a dating network. We are eighty light-years apart."

She leaned up to me, her red lips parted with excitement, her violet eyes wide. I could feel her breasts heave as she whispered, "You could come in the sample ship."

"Well!" I said and tried to turn away, but she gripped my arms. "It would take over a hundred years!" I said. "I would be traveling at near-light-speed, so I wouldn't age much, but you would. Neither of us has that kind of time." I had to get in that little dig, but if she was old as I thought, she gave no response. She might have been an actress herself once, she had such good control.

"I could put myself in deep freeze," she said excitedly, "like people who have an incurable disease. I can afford the machinery and I can afford to find a doctor who would do it." I shook my head and tried to pull away, but she held tighter with her little hands and thin arms, and pleaded. "We'll take a chance for one another. When you get here, it'll be like we're giving each other a new life."

Maybe I just got caught up in her enthusiasm — it was contagious — or maybe it was temptation pure and simple. If not for the sheer physical distance, I might very well want to cash in my contract on El Dorado and retire while I was still young to lead a rich life with a passionate woman. The

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luxury — the sex! But the fact was, "I have a planet to explore," I said. I'm not sure I said it convincingly.

She folded her arms and pulled away. "But you never actually go anywhere, do you? You explore, but you're always safe in your rig. Here I'm offering you real adventure. Aren't people more interesting than places? Think of all the people I could introduce you to. Think of me."

I didn't have any answer for that. No exit line, no excuses and it dawned on me I was in real trouble. I was out of contact, on someone else's system. I had to get out without offending her or she could complain to the UNASA officials. Inquiries, reports. I would be a laughingstock. I could not just switch off as she had done.

Oh, hell, make a move, I thought. Call her bluff. I said, "Let's do something to prove to ourselves we're doing the right thing. We don't want to make a life decision based on a computer-generated dream."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Get out of the rig. Let me see you off-line, through the remote sensor. Then I'll step out and show you me. We'll be honest with each other and with ourselves." I liked this speech. I almost believed it.

There was a silence, then she said, "Give me a minute," and the screen went blank.

Perfect! She switched off again, I thought. Her old trick. That would end it, point, set, match. I outfoxed her. When I tried to switch back to Imogen, though, I found I was still on the virtual woman's system and it wouldn't let me out. HA! She'd run so fast, she forgot to shut down. Well, I'd give her a minute, then shut down myself and start back up on my own system. I'd go back to good old Imogen, plain old, real old Imogen — or she would be real when she got back, at least. While I waited, I wondered who the virtual woman was and what she really wanted. That bit at the seniority home was probably right. Some rich old dame looking for one last fling. How transparent. Of course, a rich woman wouldn't be at a home like that one and all her equipment told me my little flirt was as rich as she said. I could be sure of that. Or maybe she wasn't old. Maybe it was any woman looking for an affair and using her equipment and her cleverness to add spice. What a pair we made, the king and queen of VR foolery. It was a shame to waste such talent — she had talent, after all — on a mere dalliance. And I should get back to good old Imogen...

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"Here I am." We were on the beach behind her house. On my face, I could feel the cool wind blown in from the water; light came from over my shoulder. The huge windows illuminated the sand. Their light shone on the luminescent paleness of her naked body.

She was not young. Forty maybe. But she held up well, like those French actresses who get better-looking as they develop more character. No, she was not young. But she was beautiful.

Her hands hung at her sides and her toes twitched in the sand. "Well?" Her waist and legs were long. Her hips were no wider than her shoulders and though her calves were sculpted like she worked out on a weight machine, the flesh on her ribs rounded over her bones. Her breasts were not firm, nor quite the same size. There is something about a real woman...

"Turn around," I said. I'll be damned, but she did it. What I really wanted, though, was a moment to check my system. I shut off my microphone and queried the source of the signal coming from Earth. "Remote sensor. Live transmission. Unenhanced." So it was genuine. But I didn't need to check. There on the back of her thighs were the little crinkles of cellulite that only reality would think to put there. No programmer would. Certainly no one who was programming her own looks could be so without ego as not to smooth out her buns. I would have. That cellulite had to be real, so she had to be, too. I zoomed in. Though it was dark, I could see she had freckles across the back of her shoulders and streaks of grey in her copper-brown hair. She had really bared herself to me after all. I was stunned and terrifically turned on.

Then it dawned on me, that the explanation might be the simplest of all: that she was genuine, that everything she said was true, and that she wanted me just for myself — for the person that I am, for MY essence — and not the distance nor anything else mattered. And why not? Passionate and egotistical, we loved our little VR games. We were made for each other. All my life I had been taught that's how love works.

She finished her slow turn and said, "Do you believe in me now?" She put her hand on her hip.

"You're beautiful," I said. "Now, it's my turn — "

"Come and get me," she said. She turned and bounded across the sand, not with the long-legged nimbleness of a simulacrum, but with the stagger and bounce of a real woman bounding over the unevenness of real sand in the half-dark. The sea whispered and glimmered and I heard her splash into the waves.

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Did I need more proof? Well, here it was: She trusted me! ME!

I had to think to make it sink in: On Earth, she was a real woman, but I was a remote-sensing robot with camera eyes and aluminum limbs. At great expense, I was customized to sense every type of experience as the sand under my piezoelectric feet told me. Yet she wanted me, this robot, to come after her in the sea — to make love to her? The illicit pleasure made my mind spin. To copulate with a robot — but no: in her mind, she would be making love with *me*, the man she loved. I hurried down the beach.

She was a streak of luminescence in the surf. I swam to her — this robot could swim! The water felt cold between my legs and in the rig, my scrotum tightened.

I swam to her and put my arm around a waist that felt soft and slender. She threw her arm over her head and took a stroke back from me. I followed, still touching her. I'm in love with her, I thought, and repeated it like a drunk. As the sea rose, I pulled myself into her more urgently than ever before. She gasped and dug her nails into my back.

Then I remembered Imogen.

I put the remote robot on automatic and rushed back to my office. My hand was over Genny's eyes. She giggled and twitched as I tickled her navel with a damask rose. I entered the perception and switched off the macro.

Her hands were soft against my back. She had the gentlest touch of any woman I ever knew, even when she used the machine. Her lips were moving and as I bent close, my unit controller turned up the volume in my earphones. Almost silently, she was whispering my name.

I leaned away. "Genny," I said. "I can't go through with this." Her eyes widened and she looked at me like she had suddenly sobered up. This was going to be difficult. I had trained her when she landed, and she learned like she was absorbing my mind. We had come together slowly over the two years we had known each other. First as colleagues, then as friends and only then as lovers. I had never done it in that order before. The lover part usually wore out long before friendship had a chance.

She laughed. "You can't be impotent in virtual reality!" she said.

I hesitated and while my simulacrum stared at her, I checked the tab to see when that cargo rocket was leaving. Tomorrow! I would have to do it now. A memory of thin arms trembling with hysterical rage raced across my brain, but I was safe, now: safe in virtual reality. Genny was half a world away.

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"That's not what I meant," I said. Just take it slow. Easy.

"Genny, have you ever thought about going back?" She sat up, her small breasts settling on her slender chest. "I mean, what good do we do the people on Earth?"

"What are you talking about, Yashi? I thought you hated Earth."

"I was just thinking is all."

"Anyway, I like it here. I like the adventure, the discovery, the open spaces."

"But aren't people more interesting than places?"

"What?"

Oh shit, here it comes. "I have to leave you, Genny."

Her jaw went slack and she shook her head slowly. After a minute, she said, "The tourist. Oh, I get it. You're feeling cramped. I moved in and you panicked. You want to get me out of your domicile." She sat upright and leaned over me, her strong body like a steel spring. "Well, it's not going to work. We have something going here — I love you. There, I said it; it's recorded on the system. And it's going to take more than a fling with a virtual woman or whatever other lame excuse you cooked up to make me give up on you." Her eyes narrowed and her nipples were firm as periods.

This was worse than the actress. All she had done was try to kill me. Imogen was actually making sense. We did have a relationship; I had never had one of those before. Pretty soon, the other Rangers would start talking about me as "Genny's man." We'd show up at parties together and go home together, too. The same home. Then, we'd get married. The other Rangers would recycle some plastifoam into a larger house for us. We'd have kids. All the virtual woman wanted was for me to give up my career and travel across eighty light-years of hard vacuum. Hell, I had done *that* before. For the first time in my life, I was scared.

"Hideashi, tell me what's on your mind. It's okay to say you're afraid." God! She even knew what I was thinking. "It's scary for me too. You're not a prize catch, you know, but it was meant to be. You get a hunch; I see it through. We complement each other."

I had never thought about it like that before. I only knew I had to get out of there. "Imogen, I meant what I said. I really am leaving you. I am cashing in my contract and taking the sample ship back to Earth. Yes, I'm going to that woman you saw me with."

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Imogen's mouth dropped open like a cargo ramp. "You're going to Earth?" I started to explain how I would give lectures and write books. She grabbed my head in her two hands and shook it.

"Who the hell needs lectures when we have virtual reality?"

I mumbled something about being a sort of romantic figure, a role model.

She took her hands away. "Hideashi, I have never seen anyone so afraid of a real relationship. Look, I can move back to my place. We can go slow. You can have your VR fling. But please, don't go off half-cocked because you're getting in too deep with me."

I didn't like that. I mean, some of what she said was true, of course, but some of what I said was true, too. The virtual woman was the most exciting, mysterious and passionate woman I had ever known in reality or elsewhere — and there had been a bundle, let me tell you. And I did want to go to Earth. I wanted that house and the money she offered and the fame I might get. I told Imogen so.

Perched on her knees, she drew toward me gently, slowly, moving her head to look into my eyes as if she were trying to get into position to examine my soul.

"Don't go," she said softly, with a conviction I had never heard in anyone's voice before. "You don't know her. She could back out at the last minute. And you can't guarantee what will happen when you get there."

"I'm not going for the guarantee, Imogen," I said. "I'm going for the adventure."

She let go of my head and pounded her fists on her knees. "Stupid man!" she shouted. "At least say you're going for love."

I thought about it. "That too," I said, "I'm going for love."

"Wait until her security fails," Imogen pleaded. "I've got a knowbot on her trail right now. It'll break through any minute."

"The sample ship leaves in the morning. The next one's not for a year."

Imogen said, "Well, if this is a trap, she's got perfect timing. She really knows how to pull your strings, Hideashi." She sat crosslegged and pulled the sheet up to her chest. "I wish I did."

A tantrum I was ready for. Blows. Recriminations. But Imogen wasn't even crying. "Are you all right?" I said.

"I can take care of myself," she said, but not like she was looking forward to it. There was a long silence. The hurt hung between us like the cold, dark

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places between the stars. Long after I thought I couldn't take it anymore, she said, "Now, one of us had better go."

"We're in my domicile in VR," I said, "but if you want to break the illusion — "

"No, I'll go." She got out of bed, holding the sheet to her chest, trailing it along the floor. She hesitated at the door. A light glistened on her cheek; out at Balboa, her system did not have the graphics capability to hide her tears. She went through the door and off-line.

I tried to switch back to the beach, but the robot was no longer available. My doppel had probably wrapped things up for me. As soon as I returned to my office, I checked the tab for a note from Imogen — nothing — then punched up the administration BBS to waive my contract. I found the sample ship was leaving within the hour. Where had the night gone? Those women had kept me hopping.

I shut down so fast my head swam and I ran out the door with just the clothes on my back. Since Imogen had taken the aircar, the only way I could get to the runway was with the cargo on the rollagon. I leaped on top of the load as a robot backed away and we rumbled off.

As I looked back, the gate swung itself shut; the domiciles looked small and they receded quickly. Between the compound and the runway fell the shadow of the trees and the draft of our motion sent a chill up my spine. I wondered how that knowbot was doing. If I only knew for certain whom I was dealing with — but when I called Imogen on my pocket phone, all I got was her answerer. Whether that meant she didn't have anything to tell me or that she was holding a grudge, I couldn't say. I only knew my heart was beating with excitement like I couldn't remember when.

The scramjet appeared in the clearing and the rollagon stopped. I climbed down, entered the cargo pod and strapped into a couch. Including catheter and intravenous, I had to plug into the pod almost as thoroughly as into my rig — I was going to be in that seat a long time — but there were no VI inputs, just the holographic monitor of a videophone. There was nothing virtual about this reality.

We tore out of the atmosphere with a bonecrushing slam. In orbit, the microgravity made me nauseated, but I switched on the holophone immediately. I had a feeling there would be a call.

The violet eyes of the virtual woman appeared. Her face was radiant. "I'm

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at the hospital," she said. Her hair was pulled back and flecked with grey at the temples. Wearing a high white collar, she appeared angelic. "Did you resign?"

"My notice is filed and I'm already in orbit," I said. "I'm on my way to you!"

"I knew you couldn't resist," she cooed. My heart leaped with love.

Just then, the screen forced up a message marked "URGENT." I had to put the virtual woman on hold and Imogen appeared. Her small blue eyes were fixed on the camera and her face looked thin and strong, as it did in reality. "I've been busy since you left," said her voice, a recording, "and I have a few surprises for you. First, the knowbot unlocked your friend's files. Does 'Yvette Sabot' mean anything to you?"

The actress. It explained everything. That was Yvette's essence I had seen: in the angle of her head, the slant of her hips. That explained the attraction I felt even for her virtual persona. And why she knew exactly how to play on my affections. But I didn't get it. Yvette hated me. Why would she want me back?

Imogen's recording went on: "She's old, Hideashi. Her kidneys are gone; she'll be dead when you arrive. Incidentally, she's as rich as you thought."

But if she's going to die...? Then I understood. Old and bitter, close to death, Yvette was using VR to settle the score. Her plan worked: I was on my way to a woman who would be long dead when I arrived, alone and penniless, in a world I had once struggled to escape. Had Imogen called just to gloat? It wasn't like her. But wait: Yvette and I had broken up eighty, ninety years ago. She lived a whole life while I was suspended in time on the transfer ship, a life full of its own triumphs and sorrows. I couldn't believe that anyone could keep pain alive for so long, or that I was the victim of an elaborate hoax. Imogen must be wrong. The virtual woman couldn't be Yvette.

The recording continued. "Now the good news. I hacked the navigational computers — you taught me well — and managed to save your life. The cargo pod didn't separate and rendezvous with the NLS shuttle. It'll stay with the scramjet and the transfer ship will return empty."

But I had quit! The cargo was expected! "What have you done?" I yelled at the recording.

"You're in a pretty extreme elliptical orbit — sorry, I was rushed. But you're such a programming whiz, Hideashi, I'm sure you can figure a way

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down. It'll take time, but you need a chance to think things over. Call me when you land, if you have anything to say. Here's a hint: start with 'Thank you."

"Thank you," my ass! That ripe bitch had ruined everything. To keep me on El Dorado, she must have cooked up the story from my personnel file: that's where her knowbot had been sniffing. An ex-lover's revenge — ridiculous! But was Yvette's name even in my file? The "URGENT" override released my screen and the virtual woman reappeared.

"Something wrong?" she asked. Her mouth didn't move when she talked, as if she were speaking through a mask. The elliptical orbit carried me so high, the computer froze her picture to enhance the weak signal, filling in the blanks of the data stream it received from a receding ground station.

"Fine. I'm about to leave orbit," I said. She smiled, relieved.

"Do you still want to know my name?" she asked. Twice each second, a scan line updated the picture. Now, wrinkles appeared around her eyes. Now, her lips were without color. I began to recognize features I hadn't seen since I left Earth.

"Because I can tell you now," she said. "I don't mind."

Yvette. She had conned me, cornered me and nearly captured me, but why give her the satisfaction? "It doesn't matter," I said. A scan line changed her eyes from violet to dishwater grey. "What matters is, we'll be together."

She said slowly, "I've waited so long for this moment." And her laughter rang like music played on crystal spheres.

After she disconnected, her image faded and the monitor showed my own face, how I appeared to others on-line. I had dark circles under my eyes. I looked tired and lost. When I didn't move, the holophone assumed I was done with it and shut down. My image faded and the screen went blank.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE'RE NOT FOOLING AROUND with our April issue this year. We have many wonderful treats in store, starting with the cover.

Artist **Jill Bauman,** who did our popular October/November cover last year, again startles the eye with her interpretation of **Marcos Donnelly**'s story, "El Hijo de Hernez." Marcos decided to take the title of this magazine seriously, and write a fantasy science fiction story (or a science fiction fantasy story, depending on your point of view) set in 1998 Los Angeles. The city is still dealing with the issues it faced in the early nineties, only a new factor has come into the mix. A mysterious and compelling man named Mr. Pietr, a man who claims to have a solution...

Ray Bradbury also focuses on Los Angeles in his story, "Another Fine Mess." But he chooses a different neighborhood to focus on, and a different time period (the present). Clangs and yells wake Belle in the middle of the night. But when she goes out to investigate, she finds nothing except the echoes of familiar voices, voices of people she has never met but always loved.

Another favorite returns in our April issue. **Robert Reed** contributes a science fiction story about a man who is hired to teach terraforming to a rich man's thirty-year-old daughter. What appears to be a lush and easy commission to the terraformer becomes, instead, a learning experience that alters him the way he alters planets.

Also in April, **Paul Di Filippo's** humor column will make a return appearance, and **Rob Killheffer** will take over his monthly book review duties. As for future issues, well, we have some wonderful stories and some lovely covers waiting for you. This year's Hugo winning artist, **Bob Eggleton,** has illustrated a marvelous **Marc Laidlaw** story, and **Barclay Shaw** has used a new computer technique to depict **R. Garcia y Robertson**'s latest science fiction story. We will also have stories from **Ron Goulart, Michael Bishop,** and **Pat Murphy**. So make sure your subscription's current.

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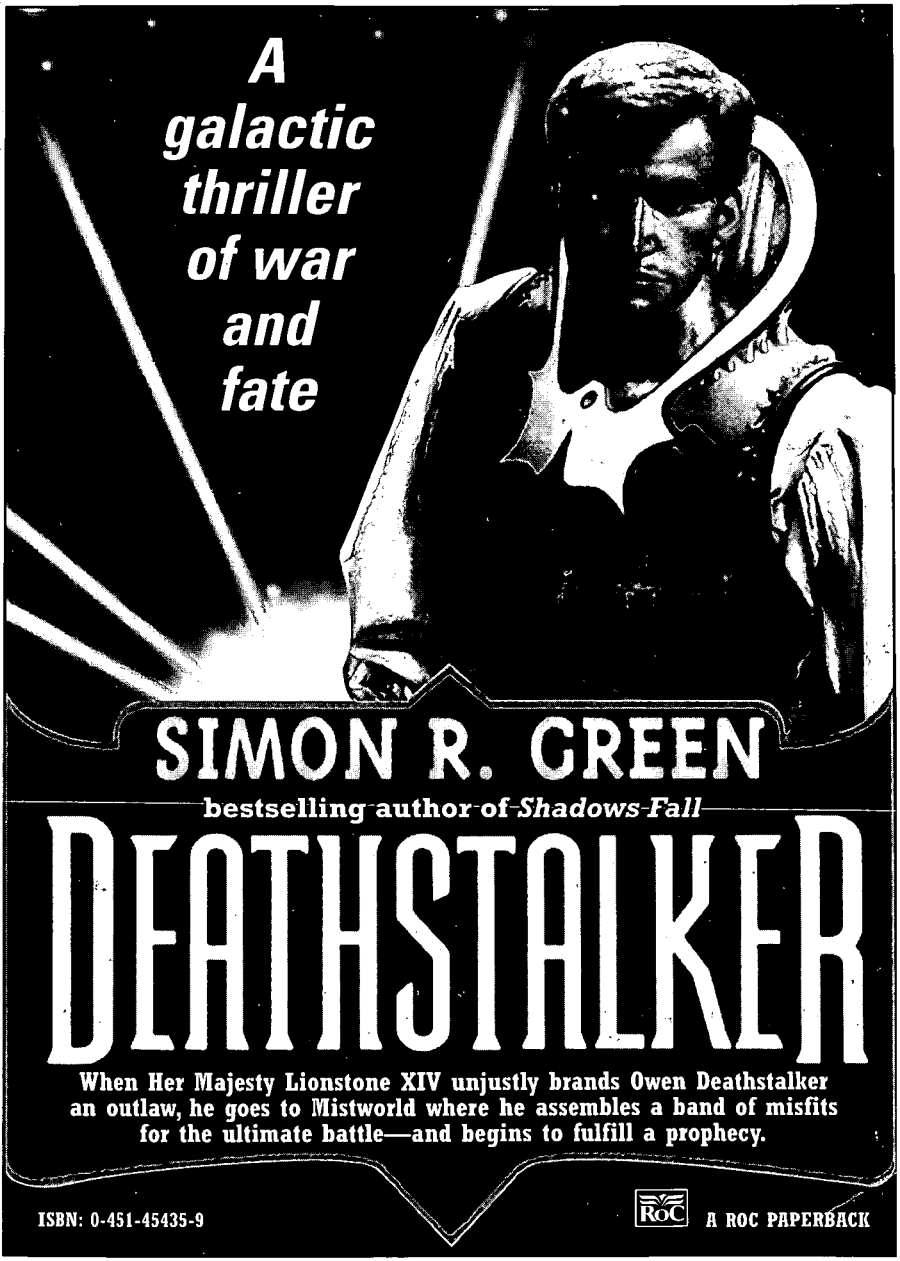

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